



**High-flying headphones:**  
Dan Clark Audio Aeon 2,  
Bowers & Wilkins PX7 & more

**Classy cartridges:** Rega  
Ania Pro, Ortofon MC Anna  
Diamond and a host of others



# Hi-Fi Choice

**PASSION FOR SOUND**

Issue No. 471

Yearbook 2020

## STUNNING SPEAKERS

Featuring Focal Chora  
826, Dynaudio Evoke  
30, Fyne Audio F500,  
Klipsch The Fives, etc.



## TOP-CLASS TURNTABLES

Including Pro-Ject  
The Classic, Vertere  
DG-1 and Gold Note  
Mediterraneo

164-PAGE SPECIAL

# HI-FI OF THE YEAR

Your expert buying guide to  
2020's hottest new kit

**70+**  
SUPERB  
PRODUCTS  
REVIEWED



## AWESOME AMPLIFIERS

Primare I25 Prisma,  
Arcam SA30, Hegel  
H120, Quad Vena II  
Play & Musical  
Fidelity M8xi



## DAPPER DACs

Bigging up Chord  
Electronics' Hugo  
TT2, PS Audio  
DirectStream  
and more...

**PLUS:**

Super streamers, cool CD/SACD  
players and all the finest gear  
from the last 12 months

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Bruce Springsteen, Beethoven,  
Miles Davis, Flaming Lips... a  
celebration of 2020's finest releases



# audience

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# Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

# Welcome

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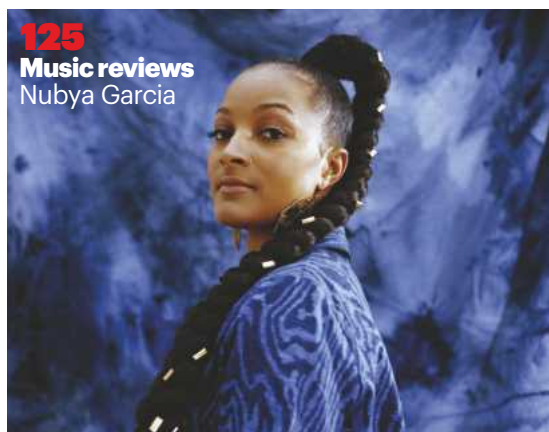


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### OUR AWARDS



**EDITOR'S CHOICE:**  
Awarded to those products that are judged to deliver outstanding performance



**RECOMMENDED:**  
Products that we feel meet a high standard of performance



**GROUP TEST WINNER:**  
Comparative tests can only have one winner, and this badge says it all!



Call it what you will – the very best of the best, the cream of the crop, top of the list, head of the heap, king of the hill – the sheer quality of the choice collection of kit contained within this very special issue of *HFC* is testament to the creativity,

resilience and ambition of the hi-fi industry in a year that, we surely don't need reminding, has been the toughest we've ever seen.

While there have been many consequences to much of the UK being locked down, one of the few upsides has been that many of us have found more time to enjoy our home hi-fi and have discovered – or rediscovered – music that is dear to us, helping us cope with the gloom.

Some have developed a new-found appreciation of their setup, while others have decided a change of direction, an upgrade or a new start is in order. And to that end, this bumper issue is here to help your next steps. Whether you intend to splash the cash or fantasise about ideal setups, among these 164 pages you'll find all the best speakers, amps, headphones, DACs, turntables and CD players our writers have scrupulously tested and reviewed during the past 12 months to provide you with an informed guide as you set out on your next hi-fi adventure.

Have fun!

**Steve Sutherland** Editor

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"The sort of sternum loading shove normally associated with being too close to an explosion"

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## FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER



# Acoustic Energy AE520

**E**ssentially an AE509 (HFC 456) on steroids, this new floorstander is a true three-way design with a claimed frequency response of 30Hz-28kHz, a valve amplifier-friendly sensitivity figure of 90dB and a peak power handling of 300W.

The tweeter is a new 25mm carbon fibre dome design with a cast aluminium WDT waveguide. It's set between the AE520's twin 125mm midrange drivers, which sport carbon fibre cones with rubber surrounds, oversized 35mm voice coils and optimised motor and suspension systems. Treble-to-mid crossover takes place at 2.8kHz, above the critical presence region where the ear is most sensitive. Then comes the cavalry – three new specially designed carbon fibre coned woofers take care of the bass from 373Hz downwards. The cabinet also sports Resonance

Suppression Composite material – Acoustic Energy's own version of constrained layer damping.

Both midrange drivers are mounted within their own dedicated, sealed sub-enclosures while the three low-frequency drivers are reflex loaded by a large rear-facing slot-shaped port, in a common lower sub-enclosure. Externally, there's a choice of piano gloss white or black and American walnut wood veneer.

### Sound quality

The AE520 is not one of those weedy, anaemic-sounding floorstanders that have you wondering why you didn't buy the standmount version at half the price. Instead, you get a large, muscular and full-range sound that has weight, grunt and go.

It offers an interesting mix of deep, fulsome tonal balance and seriously quick transients. That's quite a rare

combination. Level 42's *Something About You* sounds really snappy and propulsive – as well as having lots of bottom-end weight. The result is an extremely engaging sound that isn't in the least bit forward.

Despite its highish sensitivity, it really likes a powerful solid-state amplifier with plenty of bass grip. It doesn't sound at all bad with my World Audio K5881 tube amp, it's just that Exposure's 3010S2-D (HFC 397) transistor integrated with its many extra watts better suits its gutsy, rigorous sound. Also, this speaker needs a largish room as it can overpower smaller spaces.

Soundstaging is most impressive too; not in an overblown, throwing-it-at-you kind of way, but in a well-proportioned and natural manner. The first movement of Vaughan Williams' *A London Symphony* performed by the London Philharmonic under Bernard Haitink is beautifully carried, the AE520 digging deep to convey the immense spatial precision of my reference Chord Hugo 2 DAC (HFC 428) feeding it. There is an extra level of breadth and depth here, which makes for a really immersive experience; it's so tangible that I almost feel like I can get up off my sofa and walk around inside it.

### Conclusion

Overall, this is an impressive flagship floorstander. An excellent all-rounder, it has no obvious vices and a lot to be proud of. The only qualification that needs to be made is that it's not quite as 'characterful' as its smaller AE509 brother, which has a puppy-like enthusiasm for everything it plays. The AE520 is more mature; it's more transparent and less interventionist, telling you what's on the recording rather than simply making it sound good. In other words, you need decent ancillaries to really get the best from it. Suitably equipped, you'll find it hard not to love. **DP**

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Acoustic Energy  
AE520

**PRICE**  
£3,500

**ORIGIN**  
UK/China

**TYPE**  
3-way floorstanding  
loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
30kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
185 x 1,130 x 320mm

**FEATURES**  
• 1x 25mm  
dome tweeter  
• 2x 125mm mid; 3x  
125mm bass drivers  
• Quoted sensitivity:  
90dB/1W/1m (6ohm)

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Acoustic Energy  
**TELEPHONE**  
01285 654432

**WEBSITE**  
acoustic-energy.  
co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 468

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Tonally rich, expansive and highly musical sound

**VALUE FOR MONEY**

★★★★★

**DISLIKE:** Needs a good, powerful front end to partner it

**BUILD QUALITY**

★★★★★

**WE SAY:** A great flagship offering for AE

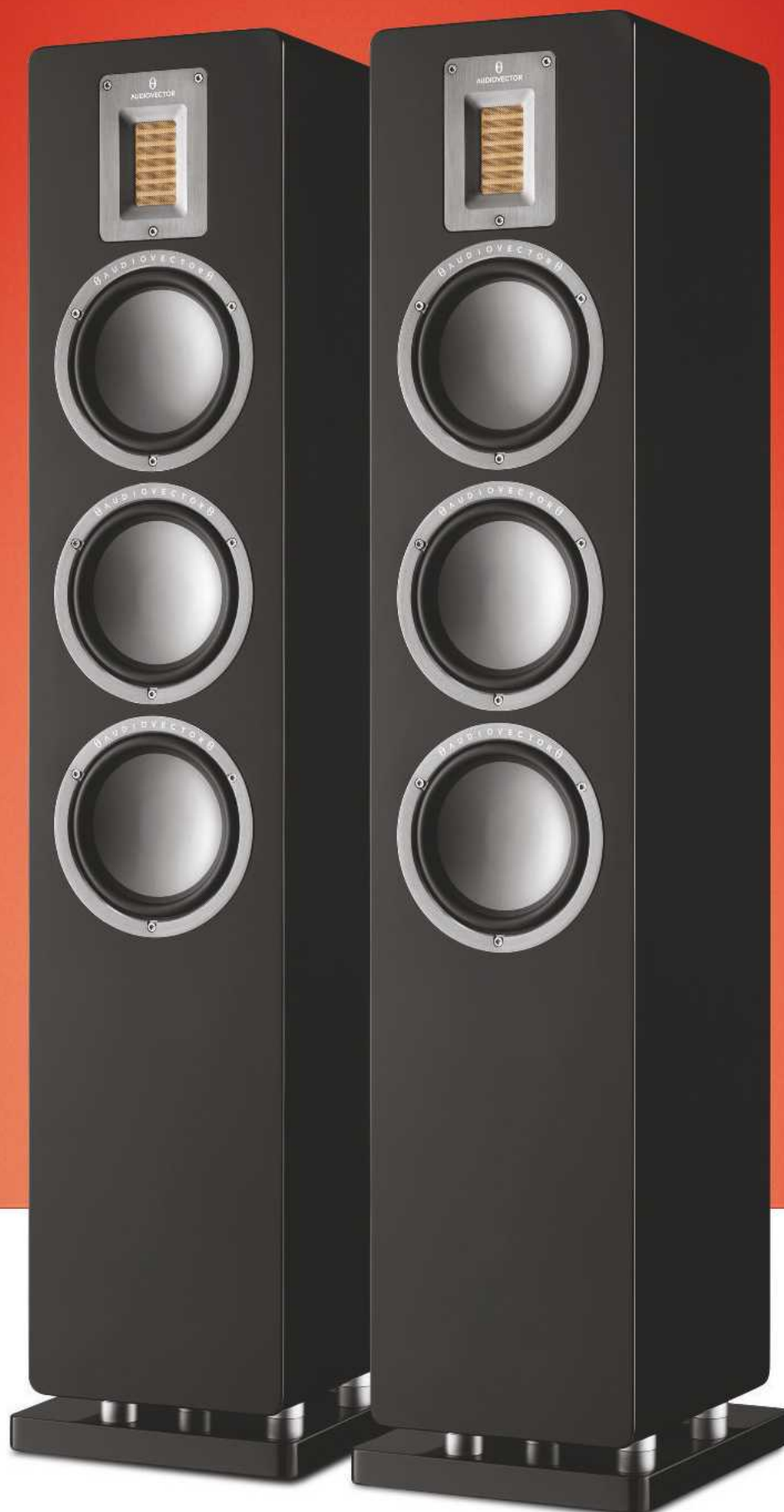
**EASE OF DRIVE**

★★★★★

**OVERALL**

★★★★★

# FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER



# Audiovector QR5

The newest addition to Audiovector's entry-level range, this great Dane joins a hugely competitive and talented sector

**D**anish brand Audiovector isn't the kind of speaker maker you can pigeon-hole. Not as large as DALI or Dynaudio, it has a core product range that stretches all the way from the £1,025 QR1 entry-level standmount (HFC 418) to the uber-high-end £200k R11 Arreté.

The QR range was designed by Audiovector CEO Mads Kilfoth. He explains his thinking: "I wanted a speaker family with build quality and value for money rarely seen at the price point." And it's a tweeter practically unseen at the price that gives the clue to the QR5's ambition. Effectively the same Gold Leaf Air Motion Tweeter (AMT) used in the R11 flagship, it really is a thing of

**The ribbon adds air, space and clarity to brilliantly open out the performance**

beauty, replete with compression-reducing double rear chamber and exposed gold mesh 'S-Stop Filter' to smooth sibilance, rather like the filters placed in front of microphones for singers in the studio.

The unit sits in a housing made from a single piece of aerospace-grade aluminium, which has been precision machined, glass blasted and brushed, and then anodised with a tungsten/titanium finish to have a reassuringly up-market sheen that exactly matches the aluminium trims of the remaining three drivers.

Being a three-way design, two of the QR5's main 152mm drivers handle the bass frequencies with the third dedicated to the midrange. Dubbed 'Pure Piston', the units feature a sandwich-type cone with two layers of aluminium constraining a fibre and foamed glue filling. The filling is intended to mitigate the high frequency break-up behaviour of the otherwise desirably stiff and pistonic

aluminium cone. It means that the midrange driver is good for much higher frequencies than would be the case with a conventional unit and, therefore, makes the handover to the AMT a much simpler affair requiring no special equalisation in the crossover. The midrange driver has been given its own sealed asymmetric enclosure to prevent standing waves.

There's a slot-style reflex port located at the base that fires down onto a plinth separated from the enclosure by about 30mm. The plinth comes fitted with nylon bolts for use with polished hard floors, but also has widely spaced threads for the spikes.

## Sound quality

Audiovector's pricier R-line speakers are famously fast, dynamic, open and rhythmically explicit and while that isn't a description I feel naturally inclined to assign to the QR5, I get the impression it's only the compromises implicit in building down to a price and the materials used that are holding it back, and then hardly at all in the upper frequencies, which are as refined and resolute as you'd hope given the quality of the ribbon tweeter. Considering the kit it's likely to be partnered with, the QR5's more relaxed presentation is by no means a bad thing.

And, as with so much involving hi-fi, such considerations tend to be relative. I decide to audition the tall Audiovector in the larger of my listening rooms and give it an outing with my resident Falcon Acoustics RAM Studio 30 (HFC 442) – a significantly more expensive three-way design of similar size that possesses an effortless, easy-breathing and largely neutral (okay, a little warm) delivery.

First surprise is that the QR5 just about matches the Studio 30 for bass extension and weight. Neither speaker is the last word in low-frequency agility, texture and definition, but the luxury of true deep bass that isn't obviously hyped should not be underestimated.

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Audiovector QR5

**PRICE**  
£2,825

**ORIGIN**  
Denmark

**TYPE**  
3-way floorstanding loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
23kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
210 x 1,057 x 270mm

**FEATURES**  
• 1x AMT ribbon tweeter  
• 1x 152mm aluminium sandwich midrange driver  
• 2x 152mm aluminium sandwich bass drivers  
• Quoted sensitivity: 91dB/1W/1m (4ohm)

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Audiovector

**TELEPHONE**  
+45 3539 6060

**WEBSITE**  
audiovector.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 468

It's a valuable asset not just in getting across the body and power of George Jiri' Mraz's double bass on *Once Upon A Summertime* from the Oscar Peterson Trio's *Walking The Line*, but also a sense of recording venue ambience and balance that feels right and allows you to relax into the music. Hard to separate the two, here. Marginally, the Studio 30 sounds a little tauter and the QR5 softer but a tad more tuneful. Both generate a wide and deep soundstage, but the QR5's imaging is a little more specific.

At the other frequency extreme, the Falcon's fabric dome tweeter is notably smooth and unfatiguing, if a little rolled-off through the speaker's voicing. Here, the Audiovector's ribbon shines, eclipsing the Studio 30 for silkiness while adding air, space and clarity to a degree that brilliantly enlivens and opens out the straight ahead wonderful opening gospel choir cut, *Every Hour* by Kanye West.

The frenetically paced and up-front track additionally showcases the QR5's deft way with female vocals which, in this case, are kept clean and potent. Timbre is beautifully portrayed. Diana Krall has seldom sounded smokier, Sarah Jane Morris hardly huskier. If the Audiovector can't match the precision and panache of the Falcon's dome midrange, it never sounds less than beguilingly clear and lucid and has an unerring ability to communicate on an emotional level. Given its ample sonic gifts elsewhere, that's good enough.

## Conclusion

I doubt those seeking a tight, fast, leading-edgy sound will immediately click with the QR5, but I'd be willing to bet they'll come round to its subtler charms given time. The temporal elements are all present and correct – dynamics, too. They're just not pushed hard in your face. For the good of a long-term relationship, I reckon that's a definite plus. **DV**

## Hi-FiChoice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**

★★★★★

**VALUE FOR MONEY**

★★★★★

**BUILD QUALITY**

★★★★★

**EASE OF DRIVE**

★★★★★

**OVERALL**

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Blends refinement and clarity like little else at the price; build and finish

**DISLIKE:** Thrill-seekers might need to consider looking elsewhere

**WE SAY:** A brilliantly judged and beautifully built floorstander for the money. A class act.



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# Dynaudio

## Evoke 30

One of the most common issues mentioned when it comes to considering floorstanders is the room that's needed to accommodate them. For those who are limited for space, the Evoke 30 has the distinction of being among the more compact options currently on the market.

In this respect, there's a lot to like. Dynaudio's designers apparently put in the extra hours, taking prototypes and models home to live with them as well as visiting interior design stores and a cross section of real homes in an effort to gain inspiration. The result, with its straight tapered cabinet walls, splayed bolt-on outriggers and, in the review sample's case, very tactile natural open-grain walnut wood veneer cladding, is a retro vibe that I guess won't be to everyone's taste, but I'd certainly make room in my house for it.

The driver tech is anything but retro. Its 28mm Ceroter tweeter is a new design that lifts tech from the company's celebrated Forty anniversary, Contour and Confidence ranges. It uses a strontium carbonate Ferrite+ ceramic magnet system and the Confidence's Hexis dimpled, resonance-reducing inner dome. The intended upshot is a smoother response and sweeter treble with greater detail and clarity.

Being a rear-ported, two-and-a-half-way system, the Evoke 30 has twin 140mm Esotec+ mid/bass drivers. Each speaker cone is made from a single piece of MSP (Magnesium Silicate Polymer) for optimum rigidity and glued directly to the glass-fibre voice-coil former, meaning more of the coil's motion energy is transferred to the diaphragm. Sensitivity is quoted at 88dB into 4ohm loads along with 200W IEC power handling.

### Sound quality

Within the first few bars of Boz Scaggs' evergreen gift to hi-fi demo suites, *Thanks To You* – taken from his *Dig* long player – it's clear the Evoke 30 has a fabulous sense of flow and lucidity. The understated, slow burning R&B ballad masterpiece contains some of the most luxurious, deep bass notes ever committed to master tape and while the Dynaudio can't quite get hold of the lowest ones with the confidence and weight of the very best, for suppleness, pitch and texture it has a sensuous quality you simply fall into.

Obviously, Dynaudio's sleeker cabinet has notable consequences for scale as well as bandwidth, but this isn't too severe and if anything the Evoke 30's comparatively bijou cabinet more convincingly 'disappears' within a spacious soundstage that extends easily beyond the boundaries of my listening room. And, perhaps as a consequence, I hear the kind of dynamic reach and expressive freedom that some larger cabinets can't quite procure.

This is especially apparent with Chet Baker and Bill Evans duetting *Alone Together* on vinyl in a phenomenally 'live'-sounding 1958 studio session. Evans is playing piano quietly and with great subtlety, Baker's deft, baleful trumpet figures are a little louder, but when Pepper Adams' baritone sax joins in its power and presence is startling and balloons the dynamic envelope. Yet each part stays in proportion and is easy to follow.

### Conclusion

Whether it's Anette Askvik or Stanley Clarke, performances are consistently clear, cohesive and well resolved. It might not have the same scale and power as bigger cabinets, nor the deepest bass or whip-crack transients, but it is a compelling listen that's capable of holding you in its thrall for hours without any residual fatigue. **DV**

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Dynaudio Evoke 30

**PRICE**  
£2,900

**ORIGIN**  
Denmark

**TYPE**  
2.5-way  
floorstanding  
loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
15.5kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
268 x 920 x 342mm

**FEATURES**  
● 1x 28mm  
soft textile  
dome tweeter  
● 2x 140mm MSP  
mid/bass drivers  
● Quoted sensitivity:  
88dB/1W/1m

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Dynaudio UK

**TELEPHONE**  
01353 721089

**WEBSITE**  
dynaudio.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 460

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

##### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

##### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

##### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

##### EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

##### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Retro/modern style; clear, cohesive, well-resolved sound; build and finish

**DISLIKE:** Bass extension falls a little short of the best

**WE SAY:** Beautifully made and finished, it looks good but sounds even better



# FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER



# Focal

## Chora 826

Introducing the new entry-level range with innovative cone material, which certainly has something to sing about

**S**ince the early eighties, Focal has endeavoured to bring new materials and composites to market in the search for the perfect driver diaphragm. These have included poly Kevlar, titanium, titanium dioxide, polyglass, flax, beryllium and the mysteriously named 'W' composite.

Now slatefiber makes its debut as – described by Focal – “a new standard in affordable loudspeaker design and performance”. What it means in practical terms is that Chorus, its long-established entry-level speaker range, is replaced by Chora with the new and unique slatefiber drivers.

As the flagship tower, the 826's mid and bass drivers are built around

### The music ebbs and flows with a fluency and cohesion that's easy to relax into

slatefiber cones – the name refers to the attractive slate-grey colour, not an ingredient. Being a three-way design, there's a 165mm unit dedicated to the midrange and two 165mm bass drivers, low-frequency output augmented by a large, aerodynamically profiled, front-facing port to help the system reach down to 48Hz at  $\pm 3\text{dB}$  and 39Hz at  $-6\text{dB}$ . The challenge to optimise lightness, rigidity and damping is the same as for any speaker cone material, but as with Focal's previous 'solutions', this one comes at the problem from a slightly different angle. After the woven flax fibre and glass fibre sandwich used in the drivers of its Aria and Kanta models, slatefiber teams thermoplastic polymer with unwoven non-recycled carbon, again as a layered composite. The upshot of having all the carbon fibres point in the same direction, according to Focal, is truly exceptional damping, lightness and rigidity resulting in superb efficiency, a spacious

soundstage and midband with minimal colouration, unfettered dynamic expression and rich, textured tonality.

The TNF tweeter is unusual, too. As well as sporting an inverted 25mm aluminium/magnesium dome, the suspension between the dome and its bracket incorporates Poron, a material with what Focal refers to as 'shape memory'. The benefit of this, claims the company, is that it makes it possible to reduce distortion by a factor of three to around 2.5kHz where the human ear is at its most sensitive, but the 28kHz frequency ceiling is impressive, too.

A magnetically attached grille covers the mid and two bass drivers, leaving the tweeter (protected by a gleaming steel mesh cap) and reflex port on show. As well as locating the 826 more securely, the screw-on plastic plinths also tilt the enclosures back by a few degrees to time-align the drivers – essential for properly focused imaging, says Focal.

### Sound quality

The Focal remains coolly agnostic, effortlessly and enjoyably revealing the differing abilities of a Cambridge Audio CXA61 (*HFC 459*) and Hegel H90 (*HFC 427*), despite their nominally identical 2x 60W power outputs which, even in my larger room, proves more than enough to drive the sensitive 826 (rated at 91dB) to very healthy levels.

There are some things a well-designed and engineered three-way floorstander of a certain size can do that are simply beyond even the best standmounts or smaller floorstanders with fewer drivers. It's a kind of easy-going generosity that unpacks a recording more completely.

If anything, this is even more apparent with the Chora 826. For instance, that lovely walking double bass that introduces Simply Red's *Sad Old Red* breathes rather than feeling as if it's being squeezed out of a constriction. Sarah Jane Morris singing John Martyn's *Sweet Little Mystery*

happens in a soundstage with believable scale and solidity, her soul-drenched huskiness portrayed with a richness and depth that tugs hard on the emotions. No, the Focal isn't quite as resolute as, say B&W's 603 (*HFC 448*) or as tonally warm as KLH's Kendal (*HFC 454*), but it does chart a very comfortable path between the two that, straight away, gives it fabulous listenability.

Also, better than both those speakers is the Focal's ability to project an extraordinarily huge and spacious soundstage with a strong sense of height and depth – maybe a result of that backward tilt. It works to stunning effect when I cue up Chick Corea's live set with bassist Christian McBride and drummer Brian Blade on the album *Trilogy 2*, capturing not just the electricity of the performance but more than an inkling of venue space and ambience. Time and again, the Chora displays a knack of handling heavy duty with a light touch. At dazzling full tilt, the Corea trio gives any speaker a lot to think about and organise, but the 826 neither blurs the detail nor labours the action. The sense of realism over exaggeration is stunningly impressive.

The same applies equally to Van Morrison's *Dark Night Of The Soul*, which sounds gloriously rich and unprocessed, Van the man's voice in fine, growly fettle. The music ebbs and flows with a fluency and cohesion that's easy to relax into. The feeling of textural shading and the finely graded palette of tonal colours and sumptuous yet effortlessly deep and supple bass are a simple joy to behold.

### Conclusion

The Chora 826 swiftly resolves any debate about whether to go for a standmount or floorstander, and it's bad news for the standmount. That it can deliver the myriad advantages of a three-way tower in a small room makes it all but irresistible. **DV**

#### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Focal Chora 826

**PRICE**  
£1,300

**ORIGIN**  
France

**TYPE**  
3-way floorstanding loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
21kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
303 x 1,053 x 388mm

**FEATURES**  
• 1x 25mm TNF Al/Mg inverted dome tweeter  
• 1x 165mm slatefiber midrange driver  
• 2x 165mm slatefiber bass drivers  
• Quoted sensitivity: 91dB/1W/1m

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Focal-JMLab UK Ltd.

**TELEPHONE**  
0845 6602680

**WEBSITE**  
focal.com/uk

**REVIEWED**  
*HFC 457*

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**

★★★★★

**VALUE FOR MONEY**

★★★★★

**BUILD QUALITY**

★★★★★

**EASE OF DRIVE**

★★★★★

**OVERALL**

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Exceptional sound; style; unfussy about placement and partnering equipment

**DISLIKE:** Nothing at the price

**WE SAY:** This is Focal right on top of its game. The Chora 826 isn't just fine value, but a great speaker full stop.

# MUSICAL FIDELITY



INTRODUCING THE:

## M8 xi

The M8xi is a preamp with two monobloc power amps combined. Each has its own heat sink and separate transformer. The preamp has its own dedicated power supply that is mounted close to the input sockets; consequently, PCB tracks are very short. This elegant idea ensures that both channels signals are ultra low impedance the instant they get into the amplifier. Each channel has twelve bipolar transistors - 200 amps peak to peak is easily achievable. The front panel is a custom made fine line extrusion of milspec aluminium keeping its clean style easy to maintain.

**Dont Settle for anything less than perfect Musical Fidelity.**





## KEF R5

**F**ar from being shy and retiring, the three-way R5 is a quite astonishing amount of floorstanding real estate for the money. What's more, it appears to be built and finished to a standard that sets a high bar for rivals to follow. Colour-coordinated drivers and flawless piano black lacquer gloss, too? Glorious. Let's call it a value perk that big companies find easier to offer.

As with every current KEF speaker, the centrepiece is a 12th-generation Uni-Q driver array. In this instance comprising a 125mm midrange element with 25mm aluminium dome tweeter seated in the middle. Behind the tweeter is a damped cavity to reduce the effects of the engineered gap between the two drivers. KEF has been using and evolving the Uni-Q principle for decades, a firm believer in its advantages with

dispersion and integration. Even its fixture-hiding trim is shaped to reduce diffraction.

Above and below the Uni-Q, in a D'Appolito arrangement, are twin 130mm hybrid aluminium bass drivers – hybrid because they consist of a shallow concave aluminium skin joined to a paper cone in a bid to optimise rigidity and lightness with low resonance and thereby reduce distortion and improve precision. Sensitivity is quoted at 87dB with a nominal 8ohm impedance, while frequency response is 52Hz-28kHz.

The rear-ported cabinet's hefty 27.3kg weight and inert feel are at least partially accounted for by the complexity of its reinforced structure, which uses constrained layer damping between the internal braces and cabinet panels. The intended goals are low resonance and a stable platform for the drive units.

### Sound quality

Is there a KEF house sound? I think so, and it's a good one – refined and transparent with a natural tonal balance and unusually well-defined imaging. Easy to live with, it hasn't always shone when compared with rivals where feistier fare has a habit of pinching points and praise. The new R5 appears to be having none of that.

Without diminishing, dressing up or in any way deserting those sterling core qualities, the re-engineering makeover has merely turned up the heat and excitement, making the R5 both more responsive and discriminating when the musical landscape demands.

In some ways, the KEF seems to marry smoothness and resolution with the fluency and flow of the Dynaudio overleaf (p11), while adding a little more muscle, scale, authority and drive into the mix. The upshot is a speaker that plays The Stanley Clarke Band's *Combat Continuum* – from *The Message* CD – large and loud effortlessly, but does so with great finesse and meticulous preservation of detail.

It isn't the kind of detail that draws attention to itself, however, but simply paints a more nuanced and intricately textured sonic picture of the musical event.

### Conclusion

The speaker's ability to render reassuringly solid stereo images and a soundstage with more front-to-back makes Anette Askvik's exquisite *Liberty* sound more mesmerisingly airy and ethereal. No less alluring is the KEF's facility for resolving rich tonal colours and harmonics – never more tellingly than on Boz Scaggs' sumptuously arranged and almost glowing *Thanks To You*. The R5 seems to take everything in its stride and, unlike some previous good-natured KEFs, isn't to be found dozing in the corner. **DV**

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
KEF R5  
**PRICE**  
£2,000  
**ORIGIN**  
UK/China  
**TYPE**  
3-way floorstanding loudspeaker  
**WEIGHT**  
27.3kg  
**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
175 x 1,025 x 344mm  
**FEATURES**  
● Uni-Q driver array:  
25mm aluminium dome tweeter with 125mm aluminium mid/bass driver  
● 2x 130mm hybrid aluminium bass drivers  
● Quoted sensitivity: 87dB/1W/1m  
**DISTRIBUTOR**  
GP Acoustics (UK) Ltd.  
**TELEPHONE**  
01622 672261  
**WEBSITE**  
uk.kef.com  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC 460

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

<b>SOUND QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>LIKE:</b> Great looks, build and finish; glorious sound; terrific value
<b>VALUE FOR MONEY</b> ★★★★★	<b>DISLIKE:</b> Nothing of any note
<b>BUILD QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>WESAY:</b> An almost flawless floorstander that capably delivers on all levels
<b>EASE OF DRIVE</b> ★★★★★	

#### OVERALL



## FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER



# Klipsch

## La Scala AL5

Introducing one of the most charismatic loudspeakers currently available. All you need is the room to really let it sing

**D**esigned by Paul Klipsch for his friend Winthrop Rockefeller, to be used as a public address speaker for his Arkansas gubernatorial campaign, the original the Klipsch La Scala made its debut back in 1963. Yet it soon became an official Klipsch product, selling as an 'auditorium speaker'.

The La Scala AL5 is the latest and greatest incarnation of this. It visually dominates even a medium-sized listening room, so you have to be a fan of its functional retro looks to

live with it on a daily basis. It comes with a choice of natural cherry, satin black ash or American walnut book-matched wood veneers, all hand finished in Klipsch's factory from veneered birch plywood and MDF, with 25mm-thick walls. The upper section comes with a magnetically affixed grille, which tones this speaker's striking looks down a little.

Inside, you find the three drive units that play such an important part in the overall sound. First, there's the huge K-33-E 381mm woofer, which

### ► DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Klipsch La Scala AL5

**PRICE**  
£12,000

**ORIGIN**  
USA

**TYPE**  
Three-way  
floorstanding  
loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
91kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
1,016 x 616 x 643mm

**FEATURES**  
● 25.4mm horn-loaded tweeter  
● 381mm bass driver  
● 50.8mm midband compression driver  
● Quoted sensitivity: 105dB/1W/1m

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Henley Audio

**TELEPHONE**  
01235 511166

**WEBSITE**  
henleyaudio.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 462

runs from a claimed 45Hz up to 450Hz. This sports a light composite fibre cone, and sits behind a two-fold birch plywood and MDF horn that's said to be a smaller version of the Klipschorn's three-fold design. Above this, the midrange compression driver takes over; a 50.8mm K-55-X unit with a phenolic diaphragm; this fires into a large exponential horn. At 4.5kHz, the 25.4mm K-771 tweeter kicks in; it has a lightweight polyimide diaphragm that sits at one end of Klipsch's 90° x 40° Tractrix horn. AudioQuest Type 4 copper cabling is used to connect everything up. This results in a claimed frequency response of 51Hz to 20kHz (+/-4dB) and a power handling of 400W, with a nominal impedance of 8ohm. These are very good numbers of course, but the real eyebrow raiser is the quoted sensitivity figure of 105dB/1W/1m. This makes it one of the most efficient commercially available loudspeakers in the world, and it's a total game changer as far as the amplification you can use it with is concerned. Suddenly, some real exotica comes

into play, like ultra-low powered parallel single-ended valve amps, for example. The Klipsch will go louder with 1W than most speakers will go with way more power.

## Sound quality

Super-sensitive loudspeakers tend to work really well in two respects. Because they give a lot of air movement for relatively little power, they often have great transient speed. It's not as if the amplifier has to huff and puff to muster enough punch to get the driver moving. And so it proves that this is the defining characteristic here – it's ultra-fast, and as a result, enormous fun to listen to. It makes music expressive and engaging in a way that precious few conventional loudspeakers can.

A great example of this comes from The Jam's *A Town Called Malice*. By no normal gauge is this an audiophile recording; it sounds like it was done on a cheap eight-track in a tatty South London studio. It's pretty compressed, has a narrow soundstage and none of the instrumental tracks are especially nice to listen to, while Paul Weller's voice is nasal. Yet the big Klipsch makes it riotously good fun, thanks to the visceral speed of the sound. Basslines are super fast and taut, snares and hi-hat cymbals are sharp and propulsive, and the band sounds brilliantly syncopated with one another. The Jam was a famously tight band, and suddenly I can hear why.

Secondly, because a speaker such as this is so easy to drive, it doesn't burden the amplifier. Most amps are happiest when they're in the middle of their operating range, because distortion tends to rise with power output. Because this is so sensitive, you can use low-powered amplifiers and run them relatively unstressed even at highish volumes. This contributes to the general sense of ease and poise; you never get the feeling that things are struggling as the amp tries to force the sound out at you. When the volume is turned up on the aforementioned Jam track, there is no sensation of the speaker sitting on dynamic transients; I can really hear the accenting of the organ and guitar work, alongside the restrained anger of Paul Weller's vocals. Even though the sound is dramatic, it is never strained – and that's a classic big Klipsch hallmark.

Another memorable facet of this loudspeaker is its bandwidth. There are few designs that properly cover everything from low bass notes right up to high treble – and fewer still that actually do justice to them. Yet here

the La Scala AL5 shows the benefit of its sheer physical presence; listening to it never gives the sense of music being squeezed through a toothpaste tube. It's physically possible for this big banger to cover all the bases, from bottom to top, on the frequency spectrum. Through most speakers, REM's *Maps And Legends* is a murky, muddy-sounding recording because it has lots of deep bass guitar work that can over power the midband, or drown out those lovely ride cymbals. Even at high volumes, the big Klipsch stays completely in control, effortlessly – nonchalantly even – carrying the propulsive bass guitar playing while keeping the midband clean and open. So many conventional floorstanders either show strain with this track, or don't do it justice because they're out of their comfort zone – but the Klipsch laps it up and asks for more.

The La Scala 5 has lost nothing of its ancestor's ability when it comes to stereo imaging, filling a large sized listening room with ease. Isaac Hayes' spacious-sounding *Café Regio*'s is cued up, an exquisite early seventies Stax record that can sound vast on the right equipment. The big cabinet duly does its job, serving up a highly expansive soundstage that is also very

## A mighty design that sounds like few others and makes music captivating

tightly defined. Image location within it, for example, is extremely good, with all the different strands of the mix placed in space just as they should be. The only downside – if you can call it that – is that the soundstage doesn't drop back as far as some other high-end speakers I've heard. Instead, it always comes out to meet you.

This hefty speaker has a multitude of talents then – speed, dynamics, rhythm, bandwidth, soundstaging and definition – but like every other, it is not without its imperfections. Some will find the La Scala AL5 a little tonally dry, because it lacks the warmth and sweetness of certain other designs. This is most noticeable on acoustic music, such as orchestral or jazz. For example, Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* with Karajan conducting the Berlin Philharmonic is wonderfully powerful, punchy and dramatic, yet the tone of the string section seems a little too thin for my tastes. With jazz, Herbie Hancock's *I Have A Dream* doesn't quite have the warm sumptuous feel it normally



**If space is a premium in your listening room, this probably isn't for you...**

delivers, and the flugelhorn is just a little too lively and shiny for my taste. Happily though, thanks to its immense sensitivity, many jazz fans will be using tube amps, which better complement the Klipsch – so this won't be so much of an issue.

## Conclusion

One of my favourite loudspeakers currently on sale, Klipsch's La Scala AL5 is a mighty design that sounds like few others available and makes music absolutely captivating to listen to in the process. Although huge and heavy, it's not actually the company's flagship – that accolade goes to the £17,500 Heritage Klipschorn AK6 – but is a far more practical proposition for anyone in terms of space. It's far from perfect – as are all speakers – but it has a unique charm and an enthusiasm for music that's hard not to love. Match carefully to a smooth sounding source and amplifier, and you're close to hi-fi nirvana. **DP**

## Hi-FiChoice

### OUR VERDICT

<b>SOUND QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>LIKE:</b> Spectacular speed, dynamics and dispersion
<b>VALUE FOR MONEY</b> ★★★★★	<b>DISLIKE:</b> Slightly dry tonality; Marmite styling
<b>BUILD QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>WE SAY:</b> An iconic big banger that's loud and proud
<b>EASE OF DRIVE</b> ★★★★★	
<b>OVERALL</b> ★★★★★	

## FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER



# Monitor Audio Bronze 500

Five years after Monitor Audio's Bronze 5G, it's all change again. But how will the new, bigger Bronze speaker stack up?

**A**ffordable is often mistaken as a euphemism for cheap, but in reality it's the place where the bond between brand and customer is either made or broken and cheap is most definitely not the impression that needs to linger. You can draw a parallel with house wine. It may be the least costly on the menu, but woe betide the establishment that supplies cheap plonk.

Monitor Audio has understood this from the beginning of the Bronze series back in late 1999 and it breaks the formula down to four basic rules. First, make an inexpensive speaker that, in build and finish, looks and feels better than a rival's pricier offering. Second, use a simpler version of the advanced driver tech trickled from upstream

**The performance is bold, immediate and raw without being aggressive or edgy**

models. Third, make sure it flatters inexpensive kit but won't embarrass itself as the quality of the user's system grows around it. And fourth, voice it for wide consumer appeal.

The Bronze 500 teams a 25mm C-CAM gold dome tweeter with a brace of 140mm C-CAM mid/bass drivers to achieve a claimed frequency range of 45Hz to 25kHz (-6dB). The 500's squatter proportions are largely down to the extra girth of its 205mm main drivers. Thanks to that extra driver real estate, it reaches down to a claimed 25Hz with a sensitivity rating of 90dB as opposed to the 200's 88dB. The 25mm C-CAM gold dome tweeter is shared between the two models.

The tweeter's so-called Uniform Dispersion Waveguide acts like a sophisticated phase plug to better control off-axis dispersion from the slightly recessed dome. It also fine tunes time alignment with the large main drivers and slightly lowers the frequency point it hands over to them.

Monitor Audio claims great things for the acoustic transparency of its magnetically attached grilles, but if you really want to see what the Bronze 500 is all about it's best to leave them off to reveal the smooth and shiny twin 205mm bass/mid drivers that dominate the look of the front baffle. In a market where 135mm and 165mm main drivers are the norm, they make quite a statement and reaffirm Monitor Audio's confidence in its long-running C-CAM composite cone build, further enhanced for new Bronze with improved cone geometry and Damped Concentric Mode (DCM) technology, an FEA optimised architecture of the cone and surround said to further improve linearity and combat breakup modes.

Bronze 6G has a starker, cleaner look than its predecessors and, dare I say it, a marginally less luxurious finish, even though the choice now extends to a trendy Urban Grey alongside the more usual White and Walnut.

Raising the chunky enclosures from the floor and making them wobble-proof are well-engineered, bolt-on steel outrigger feet supplied with spikes to pierce thick carpets and rubber bobbles for hard floors. A classy touch is the gold-plated bi-wire terminals, while silver-plated oxygen-free copper internal cabling is employed throughout.

## Sound quality

Monitor Audio is a speaker maker with one of the more recognisable house sounds and while possessing many sterling audiophile qualities, it's a style of presentation that makes no apologies for playing to the crowd. So it is here. Those big main drivers aren't just there for show. Bass is on the agenda and plenty of it, but there's nothing gratuitous or overblown about its delivery as it seems entirely in proportion to the huge soundstage the Bronze 500 is capable of generating and, in character, demonstrates surprising drive, pitch precision and speed.

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Monitor Audio  
Bronze 500

**PRICE**  
£720

**ORIGIN**  
UK/China

**TYPE**  
2.5-way  
floorstanding  
loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
18kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
231 x 951 x 325mm

**FEATURES**  
• 1x 25mm C-CAM  
dome tweeter  
• 2x 205mm C-CAM  
mid/bass driver  
• Quoted sensitivity:  
90dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Monitor Audio Ltd.

**TELEPHONE**  
01268 740580

**WEBSITE**  
monitoraudio.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 468

Placed no further than a metre from the rear and side walls in my larger listening room and toed-in a tad, its ability to fill the space with music big-boy style requiring only a modest tweak of volume from a Cambridge CXA61 integrated amp (HFC 459) is very impressive. That 90dB claimed sensitivity seems no exaggeration. When parties with loud music are permitted again, the Bronze 500 and Deep Purple will be ready and willing.

But more than that, there's a crispness and airy clarity to its performance that's rare among its price peers, especially in the context of the speaker's easy-breathing largesse, which makes for a distinctive and enjoyable mix of attributes. As has been a feature of previous Bronze models, detail retrieval is strong but so well integrated into the larger musical picture that it never lapses into dry analysis.

Top-to-bottom balance is very well realised, too. The presence region isn't pushed for effect and, as a result, vocals don't tend to have that in-your-lap projection you get with some speakers. Take Mavis Staples' singing *All In It Together* – a powerful and passionate set of pipes if ever there was. The performance sounds startlingly bold, immediate and raw, but without being gratingly aggressive or edgy. Better still, Yello's *Core Shift* probably shows the Bronze 500 at its big-hearted best, the speaker seeming to draw effortless horsepower from somewhere, spraying stereo effects across the room with gusto and launching dynamic swings that feel almost dangerous. Huge fun.

## Conclusion

Safe to say, the new Bronze 500 is no shrinking violet. Nor is it the sort of floorstander that you can tuck away discreetly in a corner and forget it's there. Both visually and sonically, it's a speaker that will make its presence felt. The bottom line is good news on both counts. The biggest Bronze is a smart box that sounds very good indeed. **DV**

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**

★★★★★

**VALUE FOR MONEY**

★★★★★

**BUILD QUALITY**

★★★★★

**EASE OF DRIVE**

★★★★★

**OVERALL**

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Effortless clarity, dynamics and bass; smart design

**DISLIKE:** It's not exactly svelte

**WE SAY:** If you're after a big sound with bags of detail and insight, look no further

★★★★★

## FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER



# Mission ZX-3

**A** two-way design, the ZX-3 partners a single tweeter with a pair of 130mm mid/bass drivers. These are both technically of interest. The tweeter is the 38mm ring dome type that first appeared in the QX Series. It features a fixed dome in the centre with the voice coil mounted halfway down. This pulls the dome into two rings and allows for better control of the entire unit. Mission says that the tweeter is able to reproduce frequencies up to 30kHz and quotes a 24kHz upper frequency roll off for the entire range.

Mission calls the design of the mid/bass driver 'DiaDrive' and it effectively has two diaphragms. The first is on the front panel and is a continuous profile, aluminium cone that appears to extend to the cabinet edge as there is no visible surround. This is because the

surround is inverted and sits under the lip of the driver edge.

Behind this is a secondary sub-cone to which the voice coil is attached. Mission says that dividing the two improves the overall efficiency and ensures a greater level of control. Around the outer edge of the driver is a series of vents designed to help regulate the flow around the driver.

### Sound quality

Listening to Poppy Ackroyd's *Resolve* highlights that it has an excellent grasp of tonal realism. These stripped-back pieces centre around the piano with only sparse support, so if the piano doesn't sound right, everything else falls by the wayside. The ZX-3 does a fine job of ensuring that it's not only entirely convincing, but also sounds rich and weighty.

It's the effective reproduction of scale that's the most impressive

attribute. The piano has the perceived mass to sound like a believable object, but this is achieved without the strings coming across as oversized or unduly prominent. With the larger and more crowded soundscape of Dead Can Dance's *Children Of The Sun*, it keeps everything sounding in-keeping with the intended scale – something that's helped by this being a commendably easy speaker to drive.

Provided care is taken in positioning, the Mission creates a space that music is allowed to happen in. There is an order and coherence to how it handles even very large-scale material that makes listening for extended periods extremely easy. Some of this also comes down to a top end that is extremely hard to provoke.

With very high-quality recordings, it lacks a little top-end sparkle. *Can't Hold Me* by Emily King is sweet, rich and effortlessly refined, but some of the fine detail isn't as perceivable here. The positive side effect of this slight reticence is that this is a speaker that can keep some fairly grim recordings sounding listenable.

The crossover between tweeter and two mid/bass drivers is seamless and tonally consistent, but for a fairly big speaker I know to be capable of a very commendable level of bass extension, the ZX-3 never feels quite as potent as perhaps it should. That said, the bass extension is detailed and quick.

### Conclusion

Comparing the ZX-3 with Mission's LX and QX ranges that preceded the ZX series, while it doesn't feel quite as fast and energetic as some of its predecessors it certainly knows a thing or two about tonality, soundstage and sheer realism. These are valuable developments and it's a sure sign of the brand's new-found maturity that the ballistic edge of past offerings has been reined in a little. The result is an exceptionally capable, well made and handsome loudspeaker. **ES**

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Mission ZX-3

**PRICE**  
£1,100

**ORIGIN**  
UK/China

**TYPE**  
2-way floorstanding  
loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
20.4kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
240 x 1,025 x 350mm

**FEATURES**  
• 38mm ring  
dome tweeter  
• 2x 130mm  
'DiaDrive' aluminium  
mid/bass drivers  
• Quoted sensitivity:  
90dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
IAG Ltd.

**TELEPHONE**  
01480 447700

**WEBSITE**  
mission.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 461

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**

★★★★★

**VALUE FOR MONEY**

★★★★★

**BUILD QUALITY**

★★★★★

**EASE OF DRIVE**

★★★★★

**OVERALL**

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Refined; tonally accurate but fun presentation; well made; good looking

**DISLIKE:** Marginally limited at both frequency extremes

**WE SAY:** A talented speaker that should be on any shortlist at the price

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PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

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NAD M10  
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Naim Uniti Atom

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Direct drive turntable with integrated MM phono amp for easy connectivity. Highly acclaimed Ortofon 2M Red cartridge fitted.

**£699**



**NAID • C 588 • TURNTABLE**

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**£699**



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PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

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BEST OVER-EAR HEADPHONE UNDER £400  
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PRODUCT OF THE YEAR



### BOWERS & WILKINS 702 SIGNATURE

Combines state-of-the-art engineering with the highest possible standards of design, finish and quality, crafted with care, honed by experience and perfected with passion.

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### BOWERS & WILKINS 606 S2 ANNIVERSARY EDITION

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Price excludes speaker stands

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### Q ACOUSTICS 3030i

Engineered to offer impressive, bassy, hard-hitting sound while maintaining wonderfully from a lightweight, discreet and gorgeously built cabinet, it's packed with the latest technological advances from Q Acoustics.

**NEW** £329



### PMC • TWENTY5.23i

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**NEW** £3850



### BOWERS & WILKINS • 805 D3

Features B&W's Diamond dome tweeter, isolated in its own solid-body tweeter assembly for precise imaging and clarity. Voices and instruments are delivered with purity and precision, thanks to the smooth, accurate Continuum™ cone mid/bass driver.

**£4750**

Price excludes speaker stands



### WHARFEDALE LINTON HERITAGE

The new Wharfedale LINTON balances fine craftsmanship, natural sound quality and affordability inside a beautifully proportioned loudspeaker.

**£999**

**WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2020**  
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WHARFEDALE LINTON



### MONITOR AUDIO BRONZE 200

The beautifully proportioned Bronze 200 floorstanding speakers deliver a surprisingly large sound. Replete with class-leading Monitor Audio technology they offer the perfect ratio of performance to size.

**NEW** £569



### KEF • R3

A true three-way speaker, the 165mm bass driver pushes bass performance to new extremes. The 125mm midrange driver and 25mm aluminium dome tweeter creates a Uni-Q array that defies the expectations from the most compact main speaker in the range.

**£1299**

Price excludes speaker stands



**WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2020**  
BEST COMPACT MAIN SPEAKER £1000-£1500  
KEF R3

### FOCAL ARIA 906

This 2-way loudspeaker features Focal's exclusive Flax cone, characterised by its low coloration and natural sound, coupled with Focal's inverted dome TNF tweeter. Aria is available in Black high gloss and real wood walnut veneer finishes.

**£899**

### KEF

**NEW**

### LS50 Wireless II Wireless Speakers £2249

The result of three years intensive research and development, the new KEF LS50 Wireless II is a fully active wireless stereo speaker system that delivers pristine, KEF signature sound coupled with great usability and high-performance wireless capability.



**WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2020**  
SYSTEMS  
KEF LS50 Wireless II  
PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

### LSX Wireless Speaker £999

From streaming to gaming, from TV to multi-room music, LSX is designed for all your home entertainment needs. Compact, elegant and incredibly versatile, LSX looks great and fits comfortably into any setting.

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**WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2020**  
BEST ALL-IN-ONE SYSTEM UNDER £1000  
KEF LSX

### BLUESOUND 2i

Bluesound Generation 2i builds on the strengths and success of the Gen 2 platform and boasts several technological updates.

### NODE 2i £499

Hi-Res Wireless Music Streamer

### POWERNODE 2i (HDMI) £799

Hi-Res Music Streamer / Amplifier

### VAULT 2i £1099

Hi-Res Music Server / CD Ripper



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PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

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## FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER



# MartinLogan Motion 20i

**A**s the smallest of three floorstanders in the revised Motion range, the Motion 20i is a three-way design with a brace of 140mm drivers partnered to MartinLogan's Folded Motion tweeter, which aims to replicate some of the qualities of its electrostatic speaker panels, but in a more compact form. While the visible radiating area of the tweeter is just 26 x 36mm, it gives a resonating area of 133 x 44mm folded into the smaller space for a lightweight diaphragm that helps keep distortion low.

The mid/bass drivers are much more conventional and employ aluminium cones. The dust cap is concave by design, to boost cone rigidity without increasing weight, but the other notable aspect is the driver positioning within the cabinet. The first is mounted just below the tweeter in the typical manner, but the

second is mounted lower down the cabinet. MartinLogan says this is in order to combat what it calls 'floor bounce' – the effect of sound being reflected from the floor before it reaches the ear. Bass extension is augmented by a rear-facing port placed near the bottom of the cabinet.

Rated sensitivity is 90dB into 4ohm, and suggests the Motion 20i is unlikely to be an especially tricky speaker to drive for many amplifiers.

### Sound quality

From the off, the Motion 20i exhibits some of the qualities of an electrostatic in a more conventional cabinet. *You Ain't The Problem*, the opening track of Michael Kiwanuka's *Kiwanuka* is presented as a large, shimmering space that extends well beyond the cabinet in terms of width and height. Kiwanuka's vocals are locked to the centre of the image with the music

happening around him in a manner that sounds wholly correct.

The bass extension is impressive for such a relatively small floorstander. MartinLogan claims to deliver a frequency response down to 46Hz, but this seems comfortably bettered. It integrates well with the rest of the frequency range and ensures that the deep electronics of Beck's *Uneventful Days* are something you feel as much as hear and there is a reasonable level of control and definition as well. This is further helped by careful placement as positioning the Motion 20i closer to a rear wall reduces this coherence. It's never going to be described as an urgent-sounding speaker, but equally it doesn't sound languid or slow.

Where it truly excels is across the bandwidth of the midrange driver and the Folded Motion tweeter. Emily King's *Forgiveness* is delivered in a way that is thoroughly invigorating. Her vocals are rich, emotive and involving while the space and three dimensionality that the MartinLogan finds is beautifully judged at helping add to the overall sense of realism. Where this arrangement of drivers particularly excels is they combine the ability to extract almost every fine detail in the mix with a refinement and forgiveness that ensures none of your music is likely to be off limits.

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
MartinLogan  
Motion 20i

**PRICE**  
£1,600

**ORIGIN**  
USA

**TYPE**  
3-way floorstanding  
loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
16.8kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
173 x 929 x 297mm

**FEATURES**  
• 1x 26 x 36mm  
Folded Motion  
tweeter  
• 1x 140mm  
aluminium  
mid/bass driver  
• 1x 140mm  
aluminium  
bass driver  
• Quoted sensitivity:  
90dB/1W/1m (4ohm)

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
PMC Distribution UK

**TELEPHONE**  
01767 686300

**WEBSITE**  
martinlogan.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 459

### Conclusion

In one regard, MartinLogan's Motion 20i is similar to the company's larger electrostatic brethren in that although it's a more conventional design, it isn't likely to be all things to all people. The effortless space and involvement it offers across most listening material is enough to ensure that some listeners will be utterly unconcerned by the more demanding aspects of its personality. If you are willing to spend a little time making sure it is working correctly in your room, this is a supremely talented and highly appealing small floorstander. **ES**

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

##### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

##### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

##### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

##### EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

##### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Midrange and treble performance; easy to drive

**DISLIKE:** Placement requires care; it can sound too laid back

**WE SAY:** An elegant design that brings some electrostatic attributes to a conventional speaker



# FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER



# Piega Premium Wireless 701

An elegant exterior can hide a multitude of sins, but pleasingly this floorstander sounds every bit as good as it looks

**P**iega's Premium Wireless 701 is the kind of speaker glossy magazine lifestyle supplements exist for. A willowy tower of gleaming aluminium, it's so good looking it puts pressure on its surroundings to come up to par. A fully active design, there's no need for untidy amps and speaker cables and the mains leads trailing from the back of each speaker are slim enough to be tucked out of sight. The same is true of the compact Piega Connect box, providing the wireless connection between source and speaker.

## Attitude on steroids, but delivered with compelling detail, warmth and texture

Piega is Italian for 'fold', and it was a new type of folded ribbon tweeter – the so-called Linear Drive Ribbon – that gave the fledgling Swiss operation a significant slice of its USP and, over time, evolved into what is claimed to be "the world's first coaxial ribbon system". The practical upshot is that Piega's large ribbon panel reaches down far lower than conventional ribbon tweeters, allowing much easier integration with the partnering dynamic drivers, which can be freed to do what they do best (bass and lower midrange).

The latest iteration of the LDR ribbon tweeter features a tweaked magnet system and new foil membrane to provide a wider frequency response (up to 35kHz is claimed) as well as improved efficiency. It's joined by two long-throw 140mm MDS drivers handling the lower-mid and bass frequencies which, with the help of a front-firing reflex port, reach down to a claimed 34Hz.

Round the back of each enclosure is a control panel with tiny switches. The one labelled Group has three positions (red, white and blue) and allows you to link pairs of wireless Piegas for multi-room installations. Only red supports 24-bit/96kHz hi-res audio; white and blue are restricted to 24-bit/48kHz. The rest of the tiny switchgear is used to 'hand' the speakers – left and right – and configure them – with DSP

## Sound quality

Stormzy's *Rainfall* immediately reveals the kind of discipline that this rare marriage of individually amplified drivers, size-zero baffles and super-stiff metal enclosures can achieve. My first impressions are of classic hi-fi qualities that shine right into the listening room: clarity and control, detail and dynamics, timing and tempo. Bouncing affectingly over a massively thumping grime beat, Stormzy's repeated "Fall on my enemies" refrain has fine intelligibility and separation, while the rhythmic detonation of bloated bass bombs registers both viscerally in the gut and has some semblance of definition and shape at ear-level. Everything considered, this is exactly what you want from a high-performance speaker system. Indeed, the sheer scale, solidity and heft of the sound is confoundingly at odds with the dainty footprint and slender form factor of the loudspeaker cabinet.

Going wireless with the Piega Connect box (and using its built-in DAC) perhaps inevitably robs the sound of some immediacy and resolving power (and takes a further quality hit when streaming with Bluetooth), but the slightly softer and warmer presentation – while less hardcore audiophilic – retains a good measure of the wired setup's precise,

organised and punctual character, underpinned by a reassuring sense of coherence and imaging focus. Enough, certainly, to appreciate the inclusion of a Rega Planar 6 turntable with Ania MC cartridge (HFC 453) and Chord Electronics' Huei phono stage (HFC 459). There's plenty going on with Beverley Knight's *BK25* outing with the Leo Green Orchestra at the Royal Festival Hall on vinyl, especially the frenetic opener *Made It Back*. It's not the greatest recording, but taking its cue from the Rega/Huei combo, the 701 doesn't labour that but instead expertly mines passion and emotion from Knight's soulful vocal while portraying the orchestral backing with effortless zeal and crisply defined timbral contrasts.

Randy Newman confirms it. I play *The Great Debate* from his terrific *Dark Matter* album and the result is attitude on steroids, but delivered with compelling detail, warmth and texture. Apart from its effortless ability to fill a big room with high-definition sound and almost preposterously full and deep bass given the apparent volume of the enclosure, the Premium Wireless 701's musical skills span the whole spectrum from get-up-and-dance verve and energy to draw-you-right-in emotional power and subtlety.

## Conclusion

Without wishing to demean the many fine, high-value compact desktop and standmount active wireless systems that are currently on sale, Piega's Premium Wireless 701 takes things to the next level. The best part of £5,500 (including the Connect wireless interface) is no small investment, but then – arguably – this loudspeaker's style, build and finish is a match for anything claiming a loftier high-end billing at many times the price. Given an appropriately talented source and the option it offers to be wired, its sound isn't far behind. **DV**

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Piega Premium  
Wireless 701

**PRICE**  
From £5,000

**ORIGIN**  
Switzerland

**TYPE**  
2.5-way  
floorstanding  
wireless active  
loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
28kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
180 x 1,060 x  
230mm

**FEATURES**  
• 1x LDR 3056  
ribbon tweeter  
• 2x 140mm MDS  
mid/bass drivers  
• Quoted power  
output: 200W  
Class D

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Piega Loudspeakers  
(UK) Ltd.

**TELEPHONE**  
+41 44 725 9042

**WEBSITE**  
piega.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 459

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★

**LIKE:** High style meets terrific sound and wireless convenience

**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★

**DISLIKE:** Wireless doesn't sound as good as wired connection

**BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★

**WE SAY:** An expensive way to go wireless for sure, but the Piega's style and sound are a class apart

**EASE OF DRIVE**  
★★★★★

### OVERALL



## FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER



# Russell K Red 120

**S**ince its start in 2014, Russell K's modest catalogue has been confined to the Red 100 and 50 standmounts and flagship 150 floorstander. These are now joined by the shorter, slimmer 120 before you.

For traditionalists, Russell Kauffman's design method seems deeply counter intuitive. Instead of regarding a speaker cabinet chiefly as a necessary inconvenience to house the drive units, he contends that the box should complete the sonic profile of the system, synergistically singing along with the drivers, starting and stopping precisely when they do.

According to Kauffman, damping slows down the sound and makes it out of synch with the forward output of the driver. So fluffy wadding is a no-no. Instead, a thin-walled cabinet flexes, vibrates and breathes in time with the main driver, working in

harmony with it rather than against it and shedding distortion as a result. In the Red 50, a single bracing shelf with multiple apertures mounted just above the 127mm doped paper mid/bass driver is used to control cabinet flex while a minimalist 12dB roll-off crossover network and rear-firing bass reflex port tuned to 55Hz also contribute towards the integration of the drivers and cabinet dynamics.

### Sound quality

The Red 120 doesn't immediately shout 'fast' like its remarkably sprightly standmount sibling. I play *Trip-Trap* from Marcus Miller's *Laid Black* album and, being a live track in a large venue, there's a lot of low-frequency ambient energy generated by Miller's Fender Jazz Bass and the escalating 'dirty' distortion effects from the desk that the Red 50 barely hints at but the Red 120 captures tellingly.

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Russell K Red 120

**PRICE**  
£3,000

**ORIGIN**  
UK/Poland

**TYPE**  
2.5-way  
floorstanding  
loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
16kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
200 x 910 x 190mm

**FEATURES**  
• 1x 25mm soft  
dome tweeter  
• 2x 127mm  
doped paper  
mid/bass drivers  
• Quoted sensitivity:  
86dB/1W/1m

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Russell K Ltd.

**TELEPHONE**  
01582 477355

**WEBSITE**  
russellk.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 461

Never underestimate the small matter of a wider bandwidth. Its impact on scale and believability can be huge. Nor is it just that the 120 reaches much lower with greater weight than the 50. What's so special is its wonderfully supple, articulate and tuneful delivery.

The Red 120 has no obvious single 'character hook'. The things that strike me are natural flow, tonal temperance, top-to-bottom unity and effortless rhythmic coherence. There's no manipulative smoothness or ramped-up warmth here. Up-tempo tunes have a vivacity and veracity no amount of artful hype can pull off. Stevie Wonder's harmonica break on *Big Brother* stuns in its immediacy, attack and verve, Steve Laury's super-chilled jazz fusion stylings on *Keepin' The Faith* have a fluency, natural timbre and relaxed gait it's hard not to get swept up in.

John Mayer's *Stitched Up* motors along with oodles of attitude and funk to showcase the Red 120's best moves: bass definition and texture, dynamic reach, perfectly judged midrange presence, superb vocal intelligibility and that glorious trinity of speed, grip and transparency. Treble that sparkles and heavy bass might be missing, but then bombastic, demo-room hi-fi crowd pleasing simply isn't on its agenda. This isn't a speaker for everyone, but if you're interested in having your neck tingled by the passion, emotion and musicianship on a recording, I'm struggling to think of anything at the price that's as convincing.

### Conclusion

More than an obvious upgrade for a Red 50 on a stand, the Red 120 demands serious consideration for anyone with £3k to spend. Whatever you think about Kauffman's undamped methodology, the results speak for themselves and, from where I'm sitting, they're very good indeed. **DV**

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Superbly natural and fluent sound; svelte form; plinth levelling spike

**DISLIKE:** You'll have to pay extra for grilles

**WE SAY:** Everything we loved about the Red 50 on a bigger canvas and with great bass



# Sonus faber Lumina III

**I**n terms of driver hardware, the Lumina III is able to make use of drivers that are employed elsewhere in the Sonus faber range. The tweeter is a 29mm silk unit that appears in the more expensive Sonetto range. Called the Damped Apex Dome, it uses an outer frame to provide local dampening of the dome to avoid anti-phase behaviour. The midrange driver is also borrowed from the Sonetto series. It is a 150mm pulped paper unit with a rather smart logo'd dust cap at its centre.

This joins a pair of newly developed 150mm bass drivers. These are also made from pulped paper, but engineered for low-frequency work and equipped with a conventional dust cap, aided by a port that exits at the bottom of the cabinet to help with placement. A low-frequency cut-off of 40Hz is quoted, albeit with no roll-off

figure given. The crossover arrangement is three-way and two sets of speaker terminals are fitted.

## Sound quality

The Lumina III manages to balance some of the expected virtues of the Sonus faber house sound with some new tricks. The use of the dedicated midrange driver pays dividends. Operating between 350Hz and 3.5kHz, it gives an impressive emphasis to vocals and instruments. Nicolas Michaux's *Amour Colère* is reproduced with his vocals becoming the centre of attention with the supporting instrumentation arranged behind. This proceeds upward to the tweeter that balances fine detail retrieval with impressive refinement. The handover between the drivers is encouragingly seamless too.

It isn't warm, but there is a smoothness and tonal richness that

helps it to deliver music in a way that is something you can enjoy for extended periods without fatigue. The bombast of The Comet Is Coming's *Trust In The Life Force Of The Deep* is fuller and less jarring than it can be on other speakers, but the clever part of this balance is that the fury and frenetic energy of the performance is retained.

However, not everything is quite so accomplished. For a speaker standing nearly a metre tall and possessed of a pair of bass drivers, the Lumina III's low end never feels hugely potent. But whatever trade-offs have been made in terms of bass weight result in good speed and dynamics. The idea that Sonus faber speakers are languid and optimised for gentle activities has always been a little overblown, but the Lumina III has a speed and attack to its presentation that is bit of a surprise. The way it deals with Mark Lanegan's crunching *The Gravedigger's Song* is hugely and unapologetically entertaining. There's just enough civility to ensure it doesn't overstay its welcome, but it is far more visceral than you might reasonably expect.

No less impressive is that the forgiving edge doesn't rob the Lumina III of the ability to shine with better recordings. Poppy Ackroyd's *Resolve* is masterfully reproduced. The details are stitched into the wider performance in a way that illuminates its presence without it becoming a distraction. The presentation fizzles with an energy that compels you to keep listening.

## Conclusion

This is a speaker that gives some nods to expectations, but in both looks and performance brings something new to the party. The company has managed to bring enough of its aesthetic and performance to the Lumina III that it is unquestionably a Sonus faber product, but this is combined with some new thinking to hopefully win over some fresh converts. **ES**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Sonus faber  
Lumina III

**PRICE**  
£2,000

**ORIGIN**  
Italy

**TYPE**  
3-way floorstanding  
loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
15.9kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
228 x 989 x 278mm

**FEATURES**  
• 29mm silk  
dome tweeter  
• 150mm pulped  
paper midrange  
driver  
• 2x 150mm pulped  
paper bass drivers  
• Quoted sensitivity:  
89dB/1W/1m (4ohm)

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Fine Sounds UK

**WEBSITE**  
sonusfaber.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 469

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Refined, detailed, impressively lively sound; handsome

**DISLIKE:** Some limitations to bass impact and scale

**WE SAY:** Blends traditional brand virtues with some new tricks for consistently pleasing results



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*"Nicely built floorstanders packed with clever engineering"*

*"Look inside the cabinet and it's hard not to be impressed"*

*"The only sound the engineers want you to hear is from the drivers...  
you can see this philosophy implemented in every  
part of the Avanti 35's design."*

*"These speakers are great at taking apart a recording  
and presenting it for inspection."*

*"They may be relatively slim, but there's a good dose of muscularity  
from that hidden bass unit. The lows are agile and punchy,  
matching the higher frequencies for responsiveness."*

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# Music in Bits.



## OUR BRANDS LIST:

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Acoustic Solid  
Antipodes Audio  
Aqua Acoustic  
Audia Flight  
Audio Physic  
Audiolab  
Audiophileo  
Audiotricity  
AudioValve  
bFly-Audio  
Boenicke  
Burson  
Charisma Audio  
Crayon Audio  
Cyrus  
Densen Audio  
Electrocompaniet  
Erzetich  
Fidelizer  
Focal  
Furutech  
Gato  
HiDiamond  
Innuos  
Isotek  
JBL  
LessLoss  
Luxman  
Lyngdorf  
Manley Labs  
Mark Levinson  
Metrum Acoustics  
MIT Cables  
ModWright  
Mytek  
Octave  
Ortofon  
Perreux  
Pro-Ject  
Puritan  
Quad  
REL Acoustics  
Revel  
Roon Labs  
Sennheiser  
SOTM  
SST Audio  
Sumiko  
Tannoy  
Titan Audio  
Triangle  
Unison Research  
Verity Audio  
Vinnie Rossi  
Wharfedale  
Wyred 4 Sound  
X-ODOS



Metrum Acoustics **Ambre**  
Roon Bridge  
**£1,099**

*"Bass was deeper, vocals clearer,  
dynamics greater and the stereo  
imagery better defined"*

Michael Evans | Stereonet



Aqua Acoustic Quality **LinQ**  
Network Interface  
**£4,982**



*"Every single detail of the mix is  
delivered through the Aqua LinQ"*

Andrew Everard | Hi-Fi News

Innuos **PhoenixUSB**  
Reclocker  
**£2,249**



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Alan Sircom | Hi-Fi +

Antipodes Audio **K50**  
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## FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER



# SVS Prime Pinnacle

**A** three-way floorstander with a bespoke midrange unit, a trio of bass drivers that you're unlikely to find elsewhere at the price and a neat 25mm aluminium dome tweeter, the Pinnacle is the very definition of a cabinet that offers maximum bang for your buck.

The new 135mm mid driver sits at the top of the cabinet and marks a change from the norm for the rest of the Pinnacle range, which typically utilise 115mm or 90mm units made from polypropylene. Instead the glass fibre cone that's also employed by the superior Ultra Tower is trickled down.

Placed directly below the mid driver, the 25mm aluminium dome tweeter boasts an FEA-optimised diffuser claimed to deliver both a wide dispersion and accurate on and off-axis delivery. Beneath this, three 165mm drivers handle the lower

frequencies. Individually tuned, they work out of individual 50mm flared rear-facing bass ports.

Eschewing the current trend for sleek curves, the Pinnacle instead opts for straight, sharp lines with finishes limited to black ash (£1,800) or gloss black (£2,000).

### Sound quality

There's so much more to this floorstander than just pure bass brutality. It won't come as that big a surprise to learn that its handling of lower frequencies is a definite highlight, but this is not at the expense of the mids or highs. Taking Michael Jackson's *Bad* as a starting point, the ascendent bassline that underpins each verse is delivered in an even and fluid nature that remains uncoloured throughout. Above this the electronic percussion has a crisp edge and realistic tonality.

The semi-acoustic *No Excuses* courtesy of Alice In Chains – a 16-bit/44kHz Tidal download – finds the Prime Pinnacle excelling for what is essentially an affordable floorstander. The twin-tracked vocals are beautifully delineated with crystal-clear clarity while the percussion – blending rapid snare, high-pitched tom toms and hi-hats into a tight syncopated rhythm – comfortably finds its space. Once again underpinning everything is that deftly delivered bassline. Thanks to the sheer amount of body that's given to lower frequencies, it sounds lively and agile as opposed to being in any way boomy or sluggish.

Showing a surprising level of sweetness, The Marshall Tucker Band's *Can't You See* underlines the Prime Pinnacle's flexibility when it comes to projecting a warm, full-bodied performance. The languid guitar and swirling flute are spread far and wide across the room as Doug Gray's plaintive vocals are afforded the grit they deserve. Meanwhile, the smoothness and texture of the piano, acoustic guitar and gently distorted Les Paul suggest that this floorstander is as comfortable with laidback seventies Southern rock as it is with bass-heavy material.

### Conclusion

Coming from a company that has traditionally specialised in subwoofers, the Prime Pinnacle is at its very best when driving forceful, propulsive percussion and bass-heavy material. But it's by no means a one-trick pony, able to turn its hand to a sweeter, more subtle and measured performance when called upon to do so. It's certainly been built down to a price and doesn't boast the sort of chic allure of more expensive rivals, but that's not the point. Svelte enough to fit into smaller rooms, this shows why you don't have to pay top dollar for a competitive performance. **HFC**

#### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
SVS Prime Pinnacle

**PRICE**  
From £1,800

**ORIGIN**  
USA

**TYPE**  
3-way floorstanding  
loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
26kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
203 x 1,029 x  
340mm

**FEATURES**  
• 25mm alloy  
dome tweeter  
• 135mm composite  
fibre glass mid driver  
• 3x 165mm  
polypropylene  
bass drivers  
• Quoted sensitivity:  
89dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Karma-AV Ltd.

**TELEPHONE**  
01423 358846

**WEBSITE**  
svsound.com  
karma-av.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 465

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

##### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

##### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

##### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

##### EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

##### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Warm, full-bodied sound; propulsive bass; price

**DISLIKE:** Treble definition could be sharper; plain design

**WE SAY:** Bass and percussion are the highlights here, but the Pinnacle's sweeter side also impresses





# Acoustic Energy AE500

**T**hink of brands famous for small loudspeakers, and Acoustic Energy is bound to ping up on the radar. Its iconic AE1 from the late eighties pretty much made the case for the existence of the breed. Coming bang up to date, the AE500 that's before you has little in common with this icon in technical terms, aside from its clear philosophical approach.

Despite being relatively affordable, this is one of the most technologically

company's Resonance Suppression Composite material – in effect, constrained layer damping. Its panels are 18mm thick and there's a choice of piano gloss white or black, and American walnut wood veneer finishes, plus a magnetic grille is supplied. Its rear-firing slotted reflex port enables it work when positioned up close to rear walls. It's quoted 87dB/1W/1m sensitivity into 6ohm loads is decidedly average compared with its peers.

## Sound quality

Despite its modest price, the AE500 never sounds out of its depth, thanks to a super clean, well defined and detailed sound that has a penchant for rhythms and dynamics. Listening to The Human League's *Open Your Heart* – taken from *Dare* – is like being pushed along on a roller coaster ride. The AE500 sprays out large amounts of detail, yet keeps it coherent and under control – and the result is a highly propulsive listen.

It's particularly good on leading edges of notes, with the attack of the drum machine's hi-hat cymbal sounding quite special. At the same time the bass synthesiser is packed with energy, rather than

just plodding along. Texturally, you get a distinctive sound that's rather special. The Congos' *Days Chasing Days* from *Congo Ashanti* is warmer and smoother than most standmounts; there's a subtle sweetness to vocal tones and percussion that's likely down to the carbon fibre. At the same time, it's not in any way excessive; it just makes things sound more even, less strident and easier to listen to. Cocteau Twins' *Crushed*, taken from a CD of 4AD's compilation LP *Lonely Is An Eyesore*, really highlights this; those loud, processed vocals aren't hard work at all. Indeed, the track is rendered with a delicacy that's completely at odds with its price.

The Acoustic Energy's excellent tweeter doesn't quite match that of the Neat Ministra (see p45), but is more refined and nicer sounding than the ATC SCM19 (p35). Cymbals on Lynyrd Skynyrd's *Sweet Home Alabama* from a CD of *Second Helping* are svelte and sophisticated – despite the fairly agricultural recording quality of the original track. At the other end, bass is taut and tight – pert, even – but rather lacks the weight of rivals. It doesn't really feel like I am missing out on much, given the fine midband and treble.

## Conclusion

Coming third in our standmount *Group Test* behind the aforementioned ATC SCM19 and Neat Acoustics Ministra is quite an impressive achievement especially considering that they are significantly more expensive than the AE500 (over twice the price in the case of the ATC). Overall, the Acoustic Energy's carbon fibre drivers give it a delicacy of tone and a transient speed that's rare at any price. A feisty and funky listen, this is a quite superb all-rounder, assuming that you can live without that bottom octave of bass. **DP**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Acoustic Energy  
AE500

**PRICE**  
£1,000

**ORIGIN**  
UK/China

**TYPE**  
2-way standmount  
loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
8kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
185 x 310 x 260mm

**FEATURES**  
● 1x 25mm tweeter  
● 1x 125mm  
mid/bass driver  
● Quoted sensitivity:  
87dB/1W/1m (6ohm)

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Acoustic Energy Ltd.

**TELEPHONE**  
01285 654432

**WEBSITE**  
acoustic-energy.  
co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 465

**Music is rendered  
with a delicacy that's  
completely at odds  
with its price point**

interesting standmounts in its price range due to its use of carbon fibre in both the mid/bass driver cone and the dome tweeter. This means big weight savings – the former is only half as heavy as its predecessor. The AE500 mates a small 125mm mid/bass to a 25mm tweeter, via a simple crossover made up of good quality components.

The reflex-loaded cabinet is conventionally shaped, but uses the

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Delicate and refined yet fun sound

**DISLIKE:** Nothing at the price

**WESAY:** A great-value, sweet-sounding bookshelf speaker



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# ATC SCM19

**A**s a classic two-way design, the SCM19 is something of a rarity in the standmount sector as it boasts a closed box or infinite baffle type box. This means the cabinet has no bass port, which generally comes at the expense of both sensitivity and bass extension. Yet fans of this design argue that it confers some domain benefits, most notable of which is tighter and tauter lower frequencies.

**Bass is seriously impressive, not due to its quantity, but its overall quality**

ATC is famous for making its own drive units, and in the case of the SC19, has opted for its 25mm SH25-76 tweeter, which is a tough soft dome design with a dual suspension system to suppress resonance. A powerful neodymium magnet is specified, and there's a 5.5mm rigid alloy waveguide.

This crosses over to a long-throw 150mm mid/bass unit with a heavy magnet system and tacky (as in sticky) doped fabric cone. The

crossover features metalised polypropylene capacitors, large air-cored inductors and ceramic wire-round resistors.

The 19-litre (hence the name) cabinet is braced and laminated for high rigidity and damping, and curved at the back. A choice of real cherry or black ash finishes are available. ATC claims a sensitivity figure of 85dB into 8ohm loads, meaning that it isn't necessarily the most efficient standmount around; you'll need to partner it with a powerful solid-state amplifier for it to give of its best. I find it works best when positioned up close to my rear boundary wall, when placed on 16in stands.

## Sound quality

The SCM19 is one of the best rock loudspeakers around, but has strength in depth and so can make pretty much any type of programme material enormous fun to listen to. The speaker's standout characteristic is without doubt its handling of rhythms – it has a live, 'pro' sound that makes you sit upright to take in all that's going on in a recording.

Consequently, Lynrd Skynrd's *Sweet Home Alabama* from the *Second*

*Helping* compact disc comes across as an absolute treat, this big standmounter stringing together all of the rhythmic clues, focusing in on the rhythm guitar, bass guitar and drums, before highlighting just how well syncopated they all are with the lead vocals.

And yet it still manages to maintain ATC's characteristic 'dry' tonality that not everyone will like. It is great with the Lynrd Skynrd track, but moving to *Open Your Heart* from the 1981 album *Dare* and the fruity, rich tone of those classic Roland Juno-60 synthesisers that Human League are so keen on can't help but feel slightly watered down. I absolutely adore the verve and gusto of this loudspeaker, but it has a tendency to make recordings sound subtly thinner and crisper than they really are. It's quite music dependent, but those with loose or warm front ends may well think it a boon.

Bass is seriously impressive, not due to its quantity, but its overall quality; The Congos' *Days Chasing Days* lets the superb mid/bass driver and infinite baffle loading shine, showing some really tight, taut, sinewy bass guitar that is impactful and tuneful but never flabby or overly full. Treble is tonally clean and timed great, although not quite as deliciously silky as Neat Acoustics Ministra (see p45), for example. The Cocteau Twins *Crushed* reveals oodles of midband detail and avoids the tendency of some speakers to sound shrill, despite Liz Fraser's icy vocals.

## Conclusion

With its huge, loud and highly enjoyable sound, the SCM19 is a natural for fans of heavy metal that want to crank the volume up and rock out. It displays that taut, tight and accurate bass, while the rest of the frequency range is over flowing with punch and power. All in all, a great performer **DV**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
ATC SCM19

**PRICE**  
£2,150

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**TYPE**  
2-way standmount  
loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
17.8kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
265 x 438 x 300mm

**FEATURES**  
● 1x 25mm tweeter  
● 1x 150mm  
mid/bass driver  
● Quoted sensitivity:  
85dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
ATC Loudspeaker  
Technology Ltd.

**TELEPHONE**  
01285 760561

**WEBSITE**  
atcloudspeakers.  
co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 465

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Rock-solid, tight and punchy sound

**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Needs a powerful amplifier to give its very best

**BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** A highly engaging and fun bookshelf design

**EASE OF DRIVE**  
★★★★★

### OVERALL





# Focal

## Chora 806

Focal turns its attention to the affordable end of the market, so where better to start than with the smallest member of its new range?

**L**oudspeaker manufacturers with a product lineup that runs from three to six figures are few and far between. Focal is one such example, however, and after a few years where the bulk of its new arrivals have been at the more premium end of the scale, the focus has shifted back to being affordable. The Chora series is the second tier of the company's range and comprises two floorstanders and the 806 standmount you see here. It follows the basic pattern of Focal

standmount speakers. It's a relatively large, two-way design that's front ported and single wired. While the formula hasn't significantly changed, the ingredients have. The 25mm aluminium and magnesium tweeter has been seen before, but it now uses a surround made from a material called poron which has trickled down from the company's more expensive models. This is intended to reduce distortion across the high sensitivity point of our hearing while simultaneously improving dispersion.

### ► DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Focal Chora 806

**PRICE**  
£600

**ORIGIN**  
France

**TYPE**  
2-way standmount  
loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
7.35kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
210 x 431 x 270mm

**FEATURES**  
• 25mm aluminium  
magnesium tweeter  
• 165mm Slatefiber  
mid/bass driver  
• Quoted sensitivity:  
89dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Naim Audio

**TELEPHONE**  
01722 426600

**WEBSITE**  
focal.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 465

The 165mm mid/bass driver is all new. Like previous models from Focal, it makes use of composites in its construction. This time, the primary ingredient is unwoven carbon fibre, arranged in parallel – something the French company says further improves consistency – and then sandwiched between two layers of thermoplastic polymer. The resulting concoction has been dubbed Slatefiber because it looks like slate once the driver has been finished. The resulting driver is extremely light and stiff – qualities Focal has long placed great emphasis on.

You might anticipate a combination of a 430mm-tall cabinet, 165mm bass driver and hefty front port to result in an extended low-frequency response, but the Chora only claims a figure of 58Hz at +/- 3dB, which drops to 49Hz at +/- 6dB. It seems the priority is ease of drive rather than outright clout. Focal claims a sensitivity of 89dB/1W/1m and an impedance that doesn't dip below 4.6ohm. The result is a speaker that's happy on the end of anything with 25W or above output.

Aesthetically, the 806 is recognisably a Focal, but it isn't the company's best work. The range is available in three finishes (Light Wood, Dark Wood and Black) and the gloss black of the review sample is the weakest of the three. The other options that match a wood effect with different coloured baffles do a much better job of working with the proportions of the cabinet and those vivid blue drivers than the black does. It's all well assembled, though, and all the points of contact are much better than what might reasonably be expected at the price. Small speaker grilles that cover the main drivers are provided and there is also a dedicated stand available for an extra £200.

## Sound quality

Historically, I've found the performance of Focal speakers to be highly dependent on placement, but the 806 is the exception to the norm. It responds to a little care being taken, but delivers the fundamentals of its performance without the sort of exacting precision that the older models so often required.

This is certainly useful but far more importantly, the overall performance

## It opens out dense and congested music without losing the emotional clout

is a significant step forward over any previous affordable Focal offering. Initially connected to a combination of the significantly more expensive Rega Aethos (p83) and T+A DAC 8 (HFC 463), the 806 behaves in a manner way above expectations for a £600 speaker.

It boasts a beautifully judged balance between detail and refinement. Listening to Fischer-Z's *Berlin* from the *Red Skies Over Paradise* album, it does a fine job with this periodically thin and edgy recording. John Watts' highly distinctive vocals lose none of their edge, but there is a civility present that encourages you to listen as loud as you like rather than what you feel the speaker can handle.

This is allied to tonality that is consistently good. *Everyone Else* by London Grammar is a less frenetic and urgent recording and the Focal luxuriates in it. Hannah Reid's stirring vocals are given pride of place, but they're stitched into the wider performance in a way that feels effortlessly natural.



**Finishes include Dark Wood, Light Wood and Black**

The expected limitations of the bass response don't manifest themselves as seriously in reality either. Given the size of the cabinet, the 806 isn't the hardest-hitting speaker going but the bass is well integrated with the upper registers, maintaining the same levels of detail and refinement that the speaker possesses in general. It indisputably does its best work with material that doesn't depend on the reproduction of seismic low notes, but even here it never feels lightweight.

Some more traditional Focal virtues are also present. The 806 manages to image exceptionally well. This grows and shrinks with the material being played, but there's a constant perception of front-to-back depth that helps create a feeling of immersion that some speakers can struggle with; giving a performance that has plenty of width, but ultimately feels somewhat two-dimensional. The efforts towards ensuring reasonable sensitivity have also been successful as this reveals itself to be an extremely easy speaker to drive.

If you partner the 806 with a more price-equivalent pairing of a Rega Brio (HFC 446) and Chord Electronics Qutest (HFC 436), the qualities it exhibits with the more expensive devices remains fundamentally unchanged. The 50W that the Brio has to its name are more than sufficient to hit any listening level you're likely to need in a domestic environment. Moreover, the Focal delivers on that same invigorating

combination of detail and civility that ensures you can choose anything in your music library and find it a highly rewarding experience.

The demented electro blues of RL Burnside's *A Bothered Mind* is something it revels in. It opens out this dense and congested recording without losing its emotional clout, keeping the crunching guitar intact.

## Conclusion

The Chora 806 is one of the strongest loudspeakers I can remember testing at this price. It may not be the prettiest available and it's possible to find rivals with better bass extension, but it lands all the punches in the right places. This is a speaker that combines ease of drive and fuss-free positioning to deliver a performance boasting tonality, detail, refinement and realism to outstanding effect. **ES**

## Hi-FiChoice

### OUR VERDICT

<b>SOUND QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>LIKE:</b> Beautifully balanced sound; well made and easy to place and drive
<b>VALUE FOR MONEY</b> ★★★★★	<b>DISLIKE:</b> Some limits to the bass extension; not especially pretty
<b>BUILD QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>WE SAY:</b> A supremely talented speaker that delivers an exceptional level of performance
<b>EASE OF DRIVE</b> ★★★★★	

### OVERALL





# Fyne Audio

## F500

The Scottish company has a blossoming portfolio, but could this be its most exciting loudspeaker introduction yet?

**S**tarting a new loudspeaker company in a competitive, over-crowded market is a risky business with the very real prospect of suffering the odd misfire or, worse, spluttering to a stall. Fyne Audio hasn't just kept up the momentum, but made it look easy. Its debut entry-level and midrange F300 and F500 lines are attractive, cannily conceived alternatives to the usual suspects and quickly put the fledgling Scottish brand on the map. That early success has been reinforced with the

introduction of significantly more ambitious fare in the shape of the F700 and F1 flagship ranges, first seen at the Munich High End show in 2019. It helps, of course, if your new venture has an experienced crew and, in this case, ex-Tannoy talent has steered the enterprise from the start. You need only to consider this F501 standmount's IsoFlare single-point driver to appreciate the 'legacy' influence we're dealing with here.

So far, we've reviewed models from the F300 series range, the £250 F301

standmount (HFC 441) and £600 F303 floorstander (HFC 447), and been impressed by the spry, insightful presentation and distinctive design. The F500 aims higher still. Fyne Audio calls this substantially built standmount: "an out and out purist audiophile design". As such, it features all three elements from Fyne's proprietary tech portfolio and looks a good deal smarter to boot.

With the magnetically attached grille removed, its gently curved baffle is dominated by a single 150mm IsoFlare driver. The aim with this is to get as close as possible to a point source where the mid/bass driver shares a common centre with the tweeter. This should enable superior stereo imaging, especially off axis, as energy is radiated 'isotropically' with constant directivity, consistent with the flared surface of the main driver's multi-fibre cone. The intended outcome is that sound is produced as if it is emanating from a single point in space.

The driver's moving parts are built around a rigid cast aluminium

### ► DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Fyne Audio F500

**PRICE**  
£600

**ORIGIN**  
Scotland

**TYPE**  
2-way standmount  
loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
7.3kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
200 x 325 x 320mm

**FEATURES**  
● 1x 150mm IsoFlare  
point source driver  
with 25mm  
concentric titanium  
dome tweeter  
● BassTrax bass  
reflex port  
● Quoted sensitivity:  
89dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Fyne Audio Ltd.

**TELEPHONE**  
0141 4284008

**WEBSITE**  
fyneaudio.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 457

chassis, which is good for damping out unwanted vibration and resonance, while the vented rear chamber in the centrally mounted tweeter's Neodymium magnet is said to place low-frequency resonance well below the crossover region. Addressing potential distortion higher up the frequency range is the tweeter's rigid titanium dome, which is claimed to push the initial break-up mode well beyond human audibility. The diaphragm sits in a waveguide that has been designed to deliver a flat frequency response and avoid internal reflections.

FyneFlute is the name for the driver's unusually contoured, variable geometry roll rubber surround, which looks like the outer tread of a tyre but is designed to provide a non-homogeneous interface as a more effective barrier for the cone's energy, leading to a cleaner, more precise sound.

## The F500's fine driver integration allows it to present music in a naturally flowing way

The final tech strand, the BassTrax Tractrix diffuser system, refers to the enclosure's type of bass reflex loading. Rather than have a conventional cylindrical port or ports on the front or back of the box, the F500 uses a downward-firing port in conjunction with a cone-shaped diffuser, the aim being to achieve full 360° dispersion of the wavefront and, with it, better room integration and more placement options. This is especially good news for those with small rooms, claims Fyne, as the sound of the F500 is less influenced by boundary proximity than rivals with rear-firing ports.

Reassuringly weighty, the F500 is also nicely detailed and finished in dark oak or, as supplied, black oak real-wood veneers or piano gloss black or white. There are two sets of binding posts should you wish to bi-wire or bi-amp and they look and feel appropriately up-market.

## Sound quality

Taking over from the Revel Concerta2 M16 (HFC 416) in my listening room, I fear for the F500 as the £1,000 American standmount is almost twice the price and can take down speakers costing half as much again. But I needn't worry. Placed on a 24in Slate Audio stand and hooked up to my Hegel H90 integrated amp (HFC 427) with Audiolab 6000CDT CD transport (HFC 447) and Chord Electronics

Hugo 2 DAC (HFC 428) up front, the F500 fights its corner brilliantly and sounds very similar to the exceptionally open, lively and engaging Concerta2 M16.

Much more so than the Revel, the F500 is remarkably sensitive to setup and I play around with toe-in for some time before things begin to gel. This done, the F500 images like a dream, floating solid, three-dimensional images in front, behind and well to the sides of the enclosures, and those in the plane between them are just as well formed and precisely positioned. In this respect it's better than the more expensive Revel.

I find it lifts the intended impact of all sorts of recordings, from early dense and murky Emerson, Lake & Palmer to Caravan Palace's studio supercharged *Chronologic*, not least *Leena*, the track's expansion and phase effects bouncing off the walls before the production rolls out a succession of depth-charge synth sweeps to die for.

Or at least they should be. Bass is lean, smooth and tuneful but lacks heft and extension, sapping slam and the kind of foundational weight that gives music a sense of mass. It's a shame, but means the speaker sounds exceptionally clean, agile and articulate, while the voicing's mild mid-forward tilt gives vocals great presence and expression. This is never better illustrated than with James Taylor's remastered *The Complete Warner Brothers Albums 1970-1976*. *Fire And Rain* has seldom sounded more gorgeous with Taylor's voice rich in tone, the accompaniment warm and intimate, and the F500 captures this beautifully.

Moving on to the more recently released *Rubberband* album by Miles Davis, the OTT production rather overshadows the musical content but it sounds fast and grippy while successfully portraying the structure and timing of the more complex and technical tracks, and thankfully without undue emphasis or exaggeration – which the recording definitely doesn't require. The speaker's ability to present music in a naturally flowing, involving way has much to do with its fine driver integration and coherent detail.

Some timing-orientated speakers can focus too fiercely on leading edges to the detriment of body, timbre and the way instrumental sounds decay. The F500 doesn't fall into that trap. That said, it never misses the opportunity to sound lively and exciting when the material dictates it. Talking of which, the tweeter is quite



**Bass energy is evenly dissipated, thanks to the BassTrax Tractrix diffuser system**

lively and excitable, too, and can sometimes be too easily heard. But there can be no denying it gives the speaker fine speed and rhythmic impetus. To be honest, the F500 isn't your typical, meticulously balanced, monitor-neutral standmount, but somehow its maverick tendencies end up being highly musical and, if you're more into music than hi-fi niceties, they do it no harm at all.

## Conclusion

This isn't really the sort of compact loudspeaker that will find favour with fans of the BBC-designed LS3/5a. Its mid-forward balance isn't textbook and its bass leanness is, initially, a bit of a let down. It doesn't stay that way once its myriad musical skills take hold. It can project an expansive soundstage and populate it with solid, 3D images. It can be subtle and seductive. It can lock down a rhythm. Best of all, it makes sense of music, whatever it happens to be. **DV**

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

<b>SOUND QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>LIKE:</b> Terrific, holographic imaging; musically literate
<b>VALUE FOR MONEY</b> ★★★★★	<b>DISLIKE:</b> Lean bass; occasionally tweeter becomes too obvious
<b>BUILD QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>WE SAY:</b> A speaker that bends a few conventions, but is all the better for doing so
<b>EASE OF DRIVE</b> ★★★★★	

### OVERALL





# Klipsch The Fives

Klipsch's new powered loudspeaker will knock your listening room for six, or perhaps that should be Fives...

**P**art of Klipsch's Heritage Wireless series, The Fives sets out to give a tiny taste of what it's like to own a grown-up Klipsch without having to drop £12,000 on the La Scala AL5.

Whether you're an old-school wired-for-sound audiophile touting a 3.5mm-to-RCA phono lead, a smartphone-wielding Bluetooth dude, or a digital fanatic with a Toslink cable, you can make music play through this speaker. Plus The Fives connects to your TV via HDMI-ARC (Audio Return Channel), so you can switch between the audio sources hooked up to your screen (like games consoles, etc.) – in effect making it a superior soundbar.

There's even an RCA line input with a switchable moving-magnet phono stage. Oh, and don't forget the USB input, letting you play music from a computer at up to 24-bit/192kHz PCM resolution. Finally, there's a subwoofer output should you wish to turn The Fives into a 2.1 system.

It's all well and good having a highly versatile set of powered loudspeakers, but such packages can be compromised by the fact that they're gimmicky with cheap and nasty cabinets, drive units and amplification.

The Fives is more robust than you'd expect. Genuine walnut wood-veneered MDF is more than most rivals offer, and there's also a matt-black finish.

## ▶ DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Klipsch The Fives

**PRICE**  
£830

**ORIGIN**  
USA/China

**TYPE**  
Powered  
loudspeaker system

**WEIGHT**  
5.35kg (powered)  
4.85kg (passive)

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
165 x 305 x 235mm

**FEATURES**  
● 25mm horn-  
loaded tweeter  
● 110mm  
mid/bass driver  
● Quoted max  
SPL: 109dB/1W/1m  
● Quoted power  
output: 160W RMS

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Henley Audio Ltd.

**TELEPHONE**  
01235 511166

**WEBSITE**  
henleyaudio.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 467

Lurking inside each cabinet is a 25mm titanium TLS-vented tweeter, with Klipsch's proprietary Tractrix horn; this is a version of the premium high-frequency drivers found on its Reference Premiere range. Claimed benefits include increased efficiency, controlled directivity, greater dynamic sound and a wider soundstage. Sharing the action is a custom-designed 110mm long-throw fibre composite coned mid/bass unit, loaded by a Tractrix port – inspired by the Heritage range.

The electronics inside serve up a claimed 160W RMS of power, with a maximum quoted sound pressure level of 109dB (at 1m). The juice comes courtesy of Class D modules, running in bi-amped configuration with passive crossovers. A sturdy proprietary umbilical cable runs from the powered speaker to the passive one, carrying a proper balanced amplified signal. Claimed frequency response is 50Hz to 25kHz. There's also tailoring of the sound via Klipsch's Dynamic Bass EQ, effectively a variable loudness feature.

The package is augmented by the inclusion of a suite of different leads – including 4m of four-conductor speaker cable, a 1.5m USB Type-B-to-USB Type-A cable and a 1.5m HDMI. The soft mat on the underside of each

speaker is a nice touch and avoids scratches to the cabinet or the surface it's placed on. The remote control is easy to use and there's also a Klipsch Connect app, which currently only supports product registration and access to updates, but will soon add EQ adjustments and other features.

## Sound quality

Being an old-school stick in the mud, I am not easily charmed by powered speakers. Happily, however, The Fives delivers a half-decent sound by grown-up hi-fi standards. Across all sources, it proves fast and fun yet more refined and listenable.

Firstly, I'm sceptical of the quoted frequency response; Nookie's *Give A Little Love* is a hard-hitting track with some serious subsonics. This speaker is prolific in the upper bass, with a satisfying punch that's unexpected from a powered package at this price

## The star attraction is the speed and grip – courtesy of that fine tweeter

– but it starts to tail off under around 100Hz. This is just what you'd expect from a compact cabinet such as this, so don't take it as a criticism. Tonally, things are reasonably smooth through the midband, ever so slightly recessed perhaps before rising a bit to give the treble some added spice.

While the high frequencies are quite explicit, they aren't as harsh as I'd feared. I'm left in no doubt of the cut-through of the hi-hat in Marillion's *Kayleigh*, but it is satisfyingly fast and percussive. The sound of the piano in Debussy's *The Submerged Cathedral* is



well etched and blessed with sparkling harmonics, but doesn't 'clang' out at me. Vocals in Thunderclap Newman's *Something In The Air* are well resolved yet don't screech, The Fives instead basks in that thick, syrupy bass guitar. Ultimately, there's a good deal of Klipsch's characteristic 'shock and awe' that makes music fun, and this powered speaker is better than expected.

Without a shadow of a doubt, the star attraction is the speed and grip. This is largely courtesy of that fine tweeter, which has lightning-fast transients that are in turn leveraged by the horn loading. This unrelenting turn of pace never fails to make music enjoyable; you're always being reminded of the attack of – for example – the strummed steel string guitar chords in *Pale Shelter* by Tears For Fears. Play this track on rivals and it's as if they mysteriously recede into the moonlight, whereas The Fives constructs the whole song

**Finishes include Walnut and Matte Black**

around it. Also, there's never a drum kit that this speaker doesn't want to be close to – I love the snare 'thwack' in The Smiths' *The Headmaster Ritual*.

Spatially it's great too – imaging is as 'out of the box' as you can expect for an inexpensive powered speaker. I find it is able to create a believable three-dimensional space, Especially via the analogue inputs. Feed it a good source and the sound takes a clear step up from Bluetooth. The digital input is very decent for this sort of product, so you can stick it on the end of a CD transport or Blu-ray player and enjoy an atmospheric sound. The way it handles a live recording of Rush's *Tom Sawyer* is really holographic, with fine image location too. Overall, you never fail to be moved by the music.

## Conclusion

If the aim is to get a hugely enjoyable sound with minimum of fuss, Klipsch has succeeded. Yes, proper separates sound better, but that's not the point. As a quick, easy and inexpensive way to unlock the world of music, this is a great package to get you started. **DP**



## Hi-FiChoice

### OUR VERDICT

<b>SOUND QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>LIKE:</b> Power; punch; speed; fun; packaging
<b>VALUE FOR MONEY</b> ★★★★★	<b>DISLIKE:</b> Styling is not to all tastes
<b>BUILD QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>WESAY:</b> A surprisingly capable powered loudspeaker
<b>EASE OF DRIVE</b> ★★★★★	

### OVERALL



## STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKER



# Magico

## A1

Looking for a taste of the high life? Pretend for a moment you've won the lottery and bask in the glory of this standmount

**T**ypical of the trickle-down technology that allows entry-level products to benefit from technological developments found in far costlier siblings, the 28mm beryllium dome tweeter that's employed across Magico's entire A range is the same as that found in the more expensive M-series, though admittedly without the diamond coating. It has a slightly simplified motor system too, but remains based on the neodymium magnet assembly and 28mm voice coil, while the entire driver is loaded into a new and improved absorptive rear chamber.

The mid/bass driver is specific to the A1. 165mm in size, it has a titanium 39mm overhanging voice

### Bass is delivered with effortless drive with no sign of artificial bloom or boom

coil with a copper shorting ring – to minimise coil inductance at higher frequencies – placed within a double ferrite magnet system.

Further indication that we're in the rarified arena of silk as opposed to cotton comes when you consider the standmount's enclosure. Constructed from six 9.5mm-thick panels of 6061 T6 aircraft-grade aluminium, the A1 is then further reinforced and braced by three extra aluminium sections that are connected to the top and bottom panels as well as halfway up the enclosure. To suggest this cabinet is rock solid doesn't even come close...

One Magico calling card that has not been ditched in order to limit the impact on your wallet is the infinite baffle design that is common to all of the US company's loudspeakers. As a fully sealed box without any reflex ports, the enclosure ensures not only superior transient behaviour, but also means it is less fussy about its positioning in your room.

### Sound quality

Crass considerations such as price quickly fade away when we consider the full majesty of what the A1 has to offer. From the off, this robust standmount vividly opens up any music you feed it, be it simple acoustic guitar or more complex mixes like Mike Oldfield's *Taurus II*.

Though the blend of uilleann pipes and Maggie Reilly's vocals invariably sound stunning with most setups, it's the more challenging Fairlight-processed strings and keyboards that really separate the men from the boys. On lesser models than the A1 these can sound crushed, thickening and coarsening the clarity of the multi-track mix. However, the Magico cuts through the murkiness like a red-hot knife through butter to reveal new levels of detail that similarly priced rivals fail to miss. Impressively the solo bell in the performance takes on a new elegance while the dynamically challenged vocoder engrosses as detail and structure come to the fore. Suddenly transitions between acoustic and synthesised are more embellished as the music experiences enhanced complexity.

Any speaker of note should display the ability to shrink further from view as the music takes over, but only the very best are able to disappear completely. And in this respect, the A1 is something of a maestro.

As Carmen Lundy's glorious vocals fill the room as she belts out *Self Portrait*, the piano, percussion and strings blend in a way that is devastatingly insightful and subtle. Suddenly every inflection of her voice and brush or splash of the cymbal is punctuated by ivory to stunning effect. The result is a sound that is exceedingly special, but not in a in-your-face kind of way, more an easy going, open and highly relaxed sound that is permeated with details – large and small – for a truly immersive performance.

Regardless of the amplifier it's matched up with, the outcome is

#### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Magico A1

**PRICE**  
£10,000

**ORIGIN**  
USA

**TYPE**  
2-way standmount  
loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
20kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
216 x 395 x 268mm

**FEATURES**  
• 1x 28mm beryllium  
dome tweeter  
• 1x 165mm Nano-  
Tec graphene  
mid/bass driver  
• Quoted sensitivity:  
84dB/1W/1m (4ohm)

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Absolute Sounds Ltd.

**TELEPHONE**  
0208 9713909

**WEBSITE**  
absolutesounds.com  
magicoaudio.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 462

consistently impressive while revealing details about the individual character, colour and dynamic potential of each setup every time.

As we'd expect from a cabinet of this size, it excels when it comes to vocals. And not because the midband is any way emphasised at the expense of the bass and treble. Sure, it can't quite match the 'in-you-head' illusion of demo-quality vocals displayed by the likes of Avantgarde horns, but challenges such as Gregory Porter's *Hey Laura* and Richard Burton's spoken word introduction at the beginning of Jeff Wayne's *War Of The Worlds* are deftly handled, revealing a seamless all-of-a-piece integration that is deeply impressive.

Even lower frequencies – so often the Achilles' heel of even the best standmounts – keep up the good work. Listening to the *Volle Dynamik* remix of Yello's *Oh Yeah*, taken from the 2009 album *The Race* sees the bass delivered with effortless drive with no sign of artificial bloom or boom. It simply descends very smoothly and then quietly exits so the absence of that missing octave goes by barely noticed. And while a glance at the specs suggests that the Magico isn't the most sensitive of speakers, the A1 still manages to soak up plenty of power and push out those SPLs as if its very existence depends upon it.

### Conclusion

Magico's A1 is an entry point to a rarified level of performance that leaves even similarly priced rivals in the shade. Flexible when it comes to placement, thanks to its infinite baffle design, this is a cabinet that you can stand anywhere and in doing so understand what all the fuss is about when it comes to high-end sonics. Hell, it even puts intermediate-sized floorstanders to shame. If you're lucky enough to afford it, it simply demands an audition. Otherwise, it's time to start saving your pocket money. **HFC**

#### Hi-Fi Choice

##### OUR VERDICT

<b>SOUND QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>LIKE:</b> Detailed, easy going, highly relaxed sound; rock-solid build
<b>VALUE FOR MONEY</b> ★★★★★	<b>DISLIKE:</b> Missing octave of bass
<b>BUILD QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>WE SAY:</b> Prepare to be amazed, quite simply a stunning standmount
<b>EASE OF DRIVE</b> ★★★★★	

##### OVERALL



# heads you win



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**METRUM**  
ACOUSTICS



# tails you win

Celebrating our two new brands that joined us in 2020.  
welcome to **Electrocompaniet** from Norway and **Metrum Acoustics**  
of the Netherlands, to the Elite Audio UK Family of Brands.



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# Neat Acoustics Ministra

**F**ollowing in the wake of Neat's floorstanding Ekstra comes the standmount version. Standing out from the crowd of bookshelf models thanks to its ribbon tweeter, the Ministra's distinctive cabinet also boasts isobaric bass loading – not that you'd necessarily know from looking at it.

On the smaller side of the standmount speaker spectrum, it marries a 50mm true-ribbon tweeter with two 134mm

inside. The front baffle is attached to the cabinet by a polyethylene membrane that's also claimed to reduce colouration.

It has a middling quoted sensitivity of 86dB into 4ohm loads and you'll need over 50W per side from your amplifier. The speaker works best in the room when positioned on a 24in stand and placed at least 30cm from a boundary wall.

## Sound quality

Our standmount *Group Test* back in the August issue was chock full of nice surprises, and the Ministra was perhaps the best of the lot. It's quite different sounding to the vast majority of bookshelf options on the market, yet largely in a highly positive way. If you were to boil it down to bare essentials, this standmount is both tonally sweet and silky, and fast and punchy. That's actually quite a unique combination, because typically it's a case of one or the other, hardly ever both...

The rough and ready recording of Lynrd Skynrd's *Sweet Home Alabama* is sweetened up and smoothed out with the upper bass pumped up ever so slightly without losing any of the song's wonderful rhythmic gait. The

butter-smooth tweeter plays a big part here, its ultra lightweight diaphragm capturing every nuance of the hi-hat cymbal, giving a spacious 'glister' to the high treble that no other model in the group is able to match. Its superfast transients really open up the midband and even appear to help the bass driver do its job.

There's nothing better than a banging slice of classic reggae to test a speaker's mettle in the bass department and The Congo's *Days Chasing Days* proves to be a real ear opener. Whereas the ATC (see p35) wrestles heroically with the bass guitar work, the smaller Neat can't quite keep things as tight – but still serves up a mighty thump that totally belies the size of the cabinet. It is softer, a little less extended, but injects a warm shot of oomph into things – again its 'fast but fulsome' character coming to the fore.

This is more than just a boom-tiz box, though, as it has one of the nicest midbands around. Fed the more sophisticated eighties pop of Cocteau Twins' *Crushed*, it scythes through the heavy effects and sets up a big soundstage with lots of detail inside. It hangs images a little further back than most, reflecting its general suave and sophisticated demeanour. Overall, it has a multitude of talents, and is hard not to like for many reasons.

## Conclusion

Standmount roundups are increasingly competitive, making it so much harder to pick a winner. This means it's much more down to an ability to work in real-world conditions. However, the Ministra has a treble quality that's on another level and matches it with a wonderfully open and precise midband. Combined with the thump of bass from the isobaric drivers, and you have a clear winner regardless of what you feed it. **DP**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Neat Acoustics  
Ministra

**PRICE**  
£1,800

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**TYPE**  
2-way standmount  
loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
8kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
170 x 300 x 290mm

**FEATURES**  
● 1x 50mm true-  
ribbon tweeter  
● 2x 134mm  
mid/bass drivers  
● Quoted sensitivity:  
86dB/1W/1m (4ohm)

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Neat Acoustics

**TELEPHONE**  
01833 631021

**WEBSITE**  
neatacoustics.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 465

**It serves up a mighty thump of bass that totally belies the size of the cabinet**

treated paper cone mid/bass drivers – the second sat directly behind the first in the rugged cabinet that additionally sports a tiny reflex port around the back. You might think this odd in an isobaric arrangement, but its designer sees it less of a port and more of a: "controlled leak". The enclosure is 18mm-thick MDF with natural oak, American walnut, black oak or satin white veneer finishes; natural internal bracing comes from the mounting of the isobaric bass unit

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Sophisticated, punchy, fast sound

**VALUE FOR MONEY**

★★★★★

**DISLIKE:** Nothing at the price

**BUILD QUALITY**

★★★★★

**WESAY:** Excellent all-round standmount

**EASE OF DRIVE**

★★★★★

**OVERALL**

★★★★★



# HUGO TT 2



## Hi-Fi Choice's 2020 Group Test Winner

'Quite simply, the Hugo TT2 mixes fire and finesse like nothing else.'

Developed from the multi-award-winning transportable DAC Hugo 2, the Hugo TT 2 is bigger, better and more advanced in every way.



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HEADPHONE AMP**

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# Paradigm Persona B

**W**here most loudspeakers show off traditional cones employing a central phase plug, the Persona B instead covers both drivers with a Perforated Phase Aligning (PPA) lens, featuring precisely defined holes to allow more sound to propagate from the edge of the drivers and to increase treble dispersion for a wider sweet spot.

The unique drivers include a 25mm tweeter and 178mm mid/bass both crafted from 99 percent pure beryllium foil. This rare metallic element is considered significantly lighter and stiffer than all other driver materials with extraordinary self-damping qualities. Furthermore, the Persona B uses voice coil designs said to increase linearity and improve clarity and control across the entire frequency range.

Our review pair has a metallic silver finish, but is also available in metallic blue or high gloss white or black. Around the back, the presence of a substantial port suggests that it's best sited away from rear walls. The beefy binding posts enable bi-wiring, but the solid metal jumper bars also allow single wiring. Matching speaker stands are available, but I use the Q Acoustic stand I have to hand.

## Sound quality

Playing *September Fields* by Frazey Ford on CD, the opening acoustic guitar is beautifully defined while a hi-hat rhythm bristles with a superb metallic shimmer. The bassline has some punch and a Hammond organ is supremely portrayed. Brass instruments are mesmerising, displaying extra body and near infinite texture. Ford's vocals are laser sharp, but a little drier than I'm used to. The insight the Persona B is able to depict is staggering. Every tiny inflection has a new level of detail to leading edges, body, transients and near endless decay. The quality of midband and treble insight is peerless, but the image can lack a little depth.

I wind the volume up a few notches for *Joy* by The Cult on CD and notice that the bass performance is more dependent on volume than many speakers. The bass guitar and drums gain some extra body and potency adding presence and warmth while also deepening the soundstage and releasing the music. This has the sort of pile-driving bass, distorted guitars, rasping vocals, strident keyboards and high ringing tambourines that usually choke smaller speakers – forcing you to turn the volume down – but the Persona B remains unflappable.

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Paradigm Persona B

**PRICE**  
£7,800

**ORIGIN**  
Canada

**TYPE**  
2-way standmount  
loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
14kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
225 x 435 x 330mm

**FEATURES**  
● 1x 25mm  
Truextent beryllium  
dome tweeter  
● 1x 178mm  
Truextent beryllium  
mid/bass driver  
● Quoted sensitivity:  
89dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Pulse Cinemas

**TELEPHONE**  
01279 647 039

**WEBSITE**  
paradigm.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 457

Changing mood with the *Spem In Alium* movement from *Magnificat* by Thomas Tallis on CD, the voices intertwine into a truly sumptuous soundscape, yet the Paradigm enables me to pick out the distinct vocal parts and even individual singers. The performers are subtly blending their voices to create highly nuanced tones, textures, resonances and a rich colour palette, yet the sheer resolving ability of the speaker draws attention to the parts more than the whole. For some, this extra insight will be ideal, but I find I'm less able to immerse myself in the majesty of the whole.

Tonally, the voices are accurate yet there is a slight sheen over the highest vocals that suggests while the beryllium drivers are controlled and nicely damped, there's evidence of a sonic signature underlining you are listening to metallic drivers. With most music this is less evident, but pure voices sometimes sound a little more ethereal and less grounded.

Conversely, the decay of notes paints a spellbinding picture of the vast acoustic space, albeit with a slightly diffuse image that softens what would otherwise be near holographic. It's absolutely in its element depicting detail that other speakers miss.

## Conclusion

The Persona B does things I've never heard a loudspeaker do before, although it can sometimes struggle to do some of the things I enjoy about other designs. It can depict every molecule of the soundscape, but can leave you wanting a little less insight and a bit more musicality. It's an addictive listen nonetheless. Experimenting with volume and amplification exhibits gains in warmth and bass extension as you add greater power, but only to a point and this is where it becomes clear that this could be a world beater when allied to a subwoofer, just as it would in a home cinema setup. **CW**

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Lightning fast sound; transient detail; superb build quality

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

**DISLIKE:** Almost too insightful; a touch bass shy; price

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

**WE SAY:** Phenomenal speaker design that re-writes the rule book, but lacks a cuddly side

#### EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

# MELCO

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### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY	★★★★★	<b>LIKE:</b> Clean lines; solid build; intelligent Music Library software
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★	<b>DISLIKE:</b> No disc ripping as standard; fixed storage capacity
BUILD QUALITY	★★★★★	<b>WE SAY:</b> Heavy optimisation of both drives and connections pays off in the crisp, clean sound
FEATURES	★★★★★	

#### OVERALL





# Spendor A1

**M**aking its name back in the seventies with its (then) highly innovative BC1 and a BBC-licensed version of the famed LS3/5a compact monitor, Spendor has always been voiced to be subtle yet revealing, rather than to machine-gun the sound out at you. This might be the company's entry level standmount, but its appeal hasn't been diluted one little bit.

**What there is in the way of bass is carried in a tuneful way that sounds fast and agile**

The A1 is tiny, modestly presented and doesn't go in for gimmicks. At its heart is a 150mm EP77 'engineering polymer' mid/bass unit that's paired with a 22mm fabric dome tweeter. These are set in a compact sealed enclosure that comes in a choice of three real-wood veneer finishes – black ash, natural walnut and dark oak. The cabinets have relatively thin side walls – deliberately so – and are visco-elastic damped. Magnetically attached grilles are also available, but will set you back extra.

The A1 proves very easy to position on a decent pair of 24in stands, and you can push it close to a rear boundary wall for bass reinforcement. The only caveat being its relatively poor 84dB sensitivity (into 8ohm loads), so you're going to need to partner it with a meatier amplifier than most for best results.

## Sound quality

Way back in the standmount *Group Test* first published in August, this diminutive cabinet revealed itself to be another worthy contender in a fascinating and highly varied pack. It has by far the most couth and polite presentation of the group by quite a way. It's one of those speakers that just gets better the more time you spend with it. Bass extension is admittedly lacking, but it's all too easy to get too wrapped up in such concerns because what lows there are, are very well handled – being crisp and tuneful. The midband is smooth yet vibrant with detail, and treble is delicate and considered – not in your face like some rivals can be.

Its defining characteristic is one of tonal evenness and sophistication – so you can the Cocteau Twins' *Crushed* on at high volume and those

shouty, processed vocals don't scare you off. Instead I find myself immersed in the song and not distracted by the production. You'd think it wouldn't be a great rock speaker, but Lynyrd Skynyrd's *Sweet Home Alabama* is more fun than expected. I'm sucked into the delicate and beautifully syncopated rhythm guitar work, locking in with a measured but revealing account of the lead vocal.

You might think reggae lives or dies by the strength of the bassline, but the Spendor begs to differ. There is little in the way of deep bass, yet what there is is carried in a tuneful way sounding fast and agile. Despite its tonal softness, the A1 handles rhythms very impressively – a trait it shares with the (in other ways quite different) Neat Ministra (p45). The Congos' *Days Chasing Days* bowls along, sounding engaging and enjoyable. Even The Human League's *Open Your Heart* proves fun with the communicative midband letting me know what's going on in the mix while carrying Phil Oakey's vocals strangely well. The track shows the fine imaging this speaker is capable of; it isn't especially wide, but image location is precise and the recorded acoustic comes across with better depth than most here. Less is so much more, it would seem.

## Conclusion

If you're looking for a headbanger of with a huge, loud and enjoyable sound to rock out to, it's probably best to look elsewhere. The A1 is the diametric opposite, offering a wonderfully couth performance with a grown up and balanced soundstage. It effortlessly conjures a taut and sinewy sound at home with all types of music. One of the best ultra-compact designs around, this should be on your audition list, especially if your listening is hampered by smaller dimensions of your room. **DP**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Spendor A1  
**PRICE**  
£1,150  
**ORIGIN**  
UK  
**TYPE**  
2-way standmount  
loudspeaker  
**WEIGHT**  
5kg  
**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
165 x 308 x 186mm  
**FEATURES**  
● 1x 22mm tweeter  
● 1x 150mm  
mid/bass driver  
● Quoted sensitivity:  
84dB/1W/1m (8ohm)  
**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Spendor Audio  
Systems  
**TELEPHONE**  
01323 843474  
**WEBSITE**  
spendoraudio.com  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC 465

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Tight but smooth, highly detailed sound  
**DISLIKE:** Needs plenty of power to drive  
**WE SAY:** A truly excellent nearfield bookshelf monitor

## Amplifiers with elegance and finesse



Integrated amplifiers clockwise from top left: Hegel H590, Luxman L-507UXII, Hegel H390, Audio Analogue Maestro Anniversary, Luxman L-509X

**Three amplifier manufacturers that offer a more refined sound than many. Their common aim is to produce a more natural sound, with accurate tonal balance, large holographic sound pictures, and fast dynamics, recreating music of all genres as honestly as the artists intended.**

**Audio Analogue** have recently redesigned several of their long-standing products with new dual mono circuitry, using higher grade components and stylish cabinets. This new Anniversary range consists of two integrated stereo amplifiers called Puccini and Maestro, which have a more refined, detailed sound producing exceptionally large sound pictures.

**Hegel Music Systems** are known for manufacturing high-end quality electronics at realistic prices. Their unique SoundEngine technology reduces the noise floor and distortions, producing a clean organic sound. A very focused range of products which include five integrated amplifiers and two pre-power amplifier combinations. All their integrated amplifiers include sophisticated DAC designs to support streaming.

**Luxman** is a legendary Japanese brand renowned for their high-end audio products. Exceptional build quality of reference standard, with a recognisable retro aesthetic, but with a modern sound from state-of-the-art electronics. A range of amplifiers including Pure Class A, Class A/B with a high Class A content, and pure valve designs. All offer an elegant, natural presentation, allowing the listener to get closer to the music through emotional involvement.



# Wharfedale Evo4.2

**A**s Wharfedale's latest range the Evo4 Series is intended to bring some of the tech and thinking developed for its flagship Elysian family to a more affordable price point. The most notable is the use of an Air Motion Transformer-type tweeter. AMT-type drivers offer a tweeter design with the mix of large radiating area and low overall mass for wide dispersion and excellent high-frequency performance.

The Evo4.2 has a rare three-way configuration of an AMT tweeter, 50mm soft dome midrange driver and a 165mm woven Kevlar bass driver. Another interesting aspect is the bass port arrangement. This is called SLPP (Slot Loaded Profile Port). It's built into the base of the cabinet and helps control and regulate the flow of air in such a way as to permit placement where you want rather than working to a minimum distance from the wall.

## Sound quality

The first point of note is that, in keeping with the adage that there's no replacement for displacement, the Evo4.2 demonstrates some impressive low end. This is slightly confusing as Wharfedale quotes a low-frequency response of 54Hz at +/- 3dB,

increasing to 48Hz at +/- 6dB, but in my room it sounds like it comfortably exceeds both these figures.

The low synth of John Grant's *Ernest Borgnine* has all the menace and drive it needs to set the stage for the singular vocal turn. It's certainly not the fastest-sounding speaker at £600 – although the SLPP system is effective at avoiding any perceivable chuffing effect to the bass itself – but with the bigger sweep of a massed band on Kamasi Washington's *Fists Of Fury*, it sounds more convincing than most.

The most important facet of the three-way design is that the drivers work together in an entirely cohesive way with no perceivable handover. The dome midrange and AMT in particular form an impressively cohesive partnership with one another. Ayo's *Rest Assured* is something that the Wharfedale seems to thrive on, and as the vocal performance makes use of both the midrange dome and AMT tweeter, there's no tonal irregularity as it moves between the two.

There is also impressively little sense of constraint or colouration from the cabinet. Provided care is taken when it comes to placing, it disappears from my perception and is

impressively difficult to pinpoint inside a big and very consistent soundstage. It benefits from being used with decent partnering equipment, but this is more a reflection of its ability to show the benefits of whatever it's attached to is capable of – thanks to its admirable transparency – rather than being a difficult design to drive.

The only drawback is that all of these very positive qualities don't add up to a speaker that is always as much fun as you might expect. Taking the Evo4.2 on a lively blast through Kasabian's *Stevie*, is strangely unsatisfying. The tonal realism remains convincing and for all the effortless top extension and dispersion, the Evo4.2 is usefully forgiving too. Simply put, at points in the track where you really ought to have a fist raised, yelling along to the lyrics, it has you parked firmly on the sofa. It would be wrong to describe it as dull, but it's not miles wide of the mark to call it rather matter of fact.

With more relaxed-tempo music, even when the time signature is relatively complex, the Evo4.2 is capable of moments of engagement, allowing you to delight in the superb performance of the upper registers in a more emotive context. The more time you spend with it, the more you become aware of the fabulous detail retrieval. Without ever sounding forensic or wearing, it extracts levels of information that are outstanding for a speaker under a grand.

## Conclusion

Wharfedale's Evo4.2 is certainly not the complete all-rounder, but I am not sure that's what the company intends. What this gentle giant can do is deliver certain types of music in a manner that is largely beyond most rivals at the price and if you are happy with its style and can work with its demands it will delight, making it definitely worthy of a thorough audition at the price. **JP**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Wharfedale Evo4.2

**PRICE**  
£600

**ORIGIN**  
UK/China

**TYPE**  
3-way standmount  
loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
13.4kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
250 x 455 x 340mm

**FEATURES**  
● 1x 30 x 60mm  
Air Motion  
Transformer tweeter  
● 1x 50mm  
midrange driver  
● 1x 165mm Kevlar  
bass driver  
● Quoted sensitivity:  
87dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
IAG Ltd.

**TELEPHONE**  
01480 452561

**WEBSITE**  
wharfedale.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 460

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

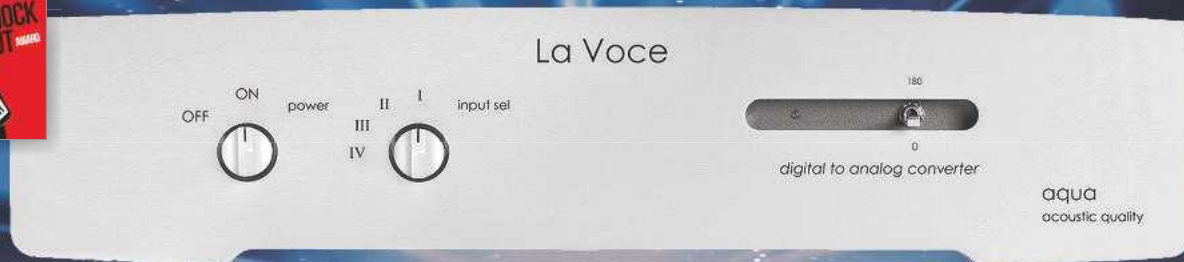
**LIKE:** Midrange and upper registers; soundstaging and sense of scale

**DISLIKE:** Can lack excitement with some material

**WE SAY:** Not a true all-rounder, but has some exceptional qualities at the price

# DAC Attack.

by  
aqua  
acoustic quality



## La Voce S3 DAC £3395

*"...the genuine article; incredibly natural sounding with all genres, easily winning a place in my system up against various and sundry more 'modern' Sabre and delta/sigma based brethren."*

**David Abramson | Stereo Times**

## La Scala MkII Optologic DAC £6200

*"The La Scala mkII DAC may well hold the sweet spot in the Aqua DAC lineup. It gives away very little compared to the Formula xHD, costs less and adds an utterly seductive touch of tube magic."*

**Cristiaan Punter | Hi-Fi Advice**

## Formula xHD Optologic DAC £11990

*"MAGICAL EXPERIENCE... I t's simply magnificent."*

**Andrew Everard | Hi-Fi News**

*"...spell-binding, a source of constant pleasure and musical satisfaction."*

**Peter Katsoulis | SoundStage Australia**

available  
EXCLUSIVELY  
in the UK at



Dealer enquiries welcome.

[info@eliteaudiouk.com](mailto:info@eliteaudiouk.com)

[eliteaudiouk.com](http://eliteaudiouk.com) | 01334 570666



# Clearaudio Concept Active

**A** development of the Concept that forms the entry point of Clearaudio's range, the Concept Active has electronic speed control – including 78rpm – and comes supplied with either a Concept MM or MC cartridge depending on your preference. Priced from £2,000 fitted with its MM cartridge, adding the MC option will set you back £2,410. Our review sample comes pre-fitted with the Concept V2 moving-magnet version.

An internal MM/MC phono stage is also built in and claims 52dB and 72dB gain respectively. You can set it to provide a line-level output to your amplifier and leave it at that if you wish, although the Active offers some intriguing extra options. For starters, there's a rotary volume control that can be used to adjust the level of the rear-panel RCA outputs and allows you to hook it up directly to a power amplifier, active speaker system or plug in a set of cans via the 6.35mm jack socket mounted on the side of the plinth to listen to LPs via the built-in headphone amplifier.

The tonearm incorporates the company's sophisticated magnetic bearings to reduce friction, which feels a little odd at first but works very well indeed. Power comes via a wall-wart PSU, although an optional £630 Smartpower 12V unit can be added as an upgrade and claims to feed the motor and phono stage with

a clean supply of battery-regulated DC power from its onboard NiMH battery pack. There's no dustcover bundled as standard and you'll need to add £150 to stop that shiny black plinth becoming a dust magnet.

## Sound quality

Selecting the *Minimum-Maximum* live boxset by Kraftwerk, the turntable is very much in its element. The propulsive rendition of *Aero Dynamik* is reproduced with all the impact and punch you could want. The effortless pitch stability and low noise floor combine to ensure no distractions from the music. Beyond the basic construct of timing, this is a turntable that flows. It takes a time signature and delivers it with an assurance that means you simply dial into the music. There aren't many turntables at the price that do this as effectively.

The bass extension is outstanding, but feels a little blunt at times. *Aero Dynamik* is punctuated by seriously low notes, which are delivered with huge weight but definition and detail can sometimes be missing. Switching the phono stage out and using an external one doesn't significantly alter this, suggesting that the limiting factor is the Concept MM cartridge.

Sleater-Kinney's *The Center Won't Hold* has composure and commendable tonal realism in the upper registers. Voices and instruments sound believable while that same effortless

flow ensures you are drawn into the music. It's not the most emotive turntable you can buy at the price, but it is consistently good fun.

While it's a little unusual to connect a headphone directly to a turntable, it works well. There's plenty of gain to drive Audio-Technica's ATH-A2000Z (HFC 412) and the performance characteristics of the Concept Active aren't significantly altered. It's still a potent and propulsive performer, but the top end is a little harder. Provided you choose your headphone with a degree of care, this shouldn't be too much of a challenge to overcome.

## Conclusion

If you are looking for a turntable that's flexible enough to satisfy a range of different types of music, this makes a great deal of sense. Clearaudio has made a fuss-free and superbly built and specified package that makes music in a consistently compelling and entertaining way. When you also consider the upgrade potential it offers, this is a mighty fine 'concept' that's fully deserving of our enthusiastic recommendation. **ES**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Clearaudio  
Concept Active

**PRICE**  
From £2,000

**ORIGIN**  
Germany

**TYPE**  
Belt-drive turntable

**WEIGHT**  
7.6kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
420 x 125 x 350mm

**FEATURES**  
• Electronic speed control for 33, 45 and 78rpm  
• Built-in MM/MC phono stage  
• 6.35mm headphone output

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Sound Foundations

**TELEPHONE**  
0118 9814238

**WEBSITE**  
clearaudio.de

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 460

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★

**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★

**BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★

**FEATURES**  
★★★★★

**OVERALL**  
★★★★★

**LIKE:** Potent, rhythmic and lively sound; build; features; easy setup

**DISLIKE:** Slight lack of bass definition and emotional warmth

**WESAY:** An unquestionably talented packaged turntable aiming for a broad appeal



# Elipson Chroma 400 RIAA BT

**W**ith the exception of its Ortofon cartridges, Elipson's turntables are bespoke and do not share parts with any other model. This means they have the interesting Orbital Torsion tonearm, which combines the bearings into a 'knuckle' in the centre of a circular housing that has the antiskate applied through the axis of the two bearings. Elipson has added an armlift and made the counterweight easier to adjust for different cartridges. The motor benefits from improved mounting to reduce interference and vibration, and includes an electronic speed control. The phono stage cannot be switched out of the circuit, but alternates between moving-magnet and coil operation. The Bluetooth transmitter can send an aptX HD line-level signal to a suitable receiver.

## Sound quality

The phono stage meets all the criteria for good performance admirably. It's silent at idle, commendably pitch stable and noise levels are low to the point of being inaudible during normal use. It takes Joan Armatrading's *Me Myself And I* and delivers those wonderful, sonorous vocals with enough warmth and richness to be

convincing without tipping over into sounding bloomy or overblown. They form the centre of the soundstage with supporting instruments arrayed neatly behind. There might not be a truly expansive soundstage, but there is generally enough room to ensure that nothing sounds congested.

The partnership with the Ortofon OM10 cartridge is a good one. The OM10 can be a little on the bright side, making it sound a touch sharp and forward with poorer pressings. The Elipson doesn't have this issue, instead sounding detailed and energetic, but never overly bright.

The bass extension is tight and well controlled, but never feels especially seismic, even with Dead Can Dance's *Spiritchaser* and its sensational bass mastering. Without compromising on the fundamental feeling of accuracy, there is a rhythmic engagement that ensures that the Elipson manages to get the head nodding. It has been a while since I listened to the preceding Omega model, but this does seem to be a meaningful improvement over the older design – which was a little more matter of fact in its presentation.

The Bluetooth implementation is very good too. aptX HD streaming gives a commendable facsimile of the

performance via a wired connection while listening to Marina's *Love + Fear*. The range is sufficient that I can place the Elipson in a different room without any drop out or interference. Unless you have a very specific application for this feature, I'm not completely sure I can see the point of it, but this isn't a complaint that's specific to the Elipson turntable.

## Conclusion

The Chroma 400 RIAA BT is a useful step forward over its predecessor without losing the aesthetics and design flair that made the original so appealing. The changes add up to a more capable and user-friendly turntable that looks and feels more special than most. Thanks to its decent phono stage and fundamentally benign characteristics, this is a fine option for anyone looking for a plug-and-play turntable that doesn't compromise when it comes to the business of vinyl replay. The Bluetooth section doesn't feel like a 'must have' extra, but judged in comparison with similar fitments there is no arguing with the performance it offers. **ES**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Elipson Chroma 400 RIAA BT  
**PRICE**  
£500  
**ORIGIN**  
France  
**TYPE**  
Belt-drive turntable  
**WEIGHT**  
5.8kg  
**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
450 x 120 x 380mm  
**FEATURES**  
• 33/45/78rpm  
• Carbon fibre tonearm with Ortofon OM10 cartridge  
• On board MM/MC phono stage  
• aptX HD Bluetooth transmitter  
**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Avoke Ltd.  
**TELEPHONE**  
01628 857958  
**WEBSITE**  
en.elipson.com  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC 467

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Engaging and refined performance; attractive; build quality

**DISLIKE:** Limited bass extension; crude armlift

**WE SAY:** A capable and engaging turntable that delivers excellent plug-and-play performance



## ZEN Blue

Bluetooth DAC

## ZEN CAN

Headphone amp

## ZEN DAC

USB DAC and  
headphone amp

## ZEN Phono

MM/MC phono stage





# Gold Note Mediterraneo

Forget Michelangelo, Raphael and Donatello, when it comes to the Renaissance Gold Note is a modern master

**A**s the flagship offering from Gold Note's five-strong turntable range, the Mediterraneo is sleek looking, superbly crafted and exudes precisely the sort of good looks that Italy is traditionally known for.

Its platter is 45mm thick and produced from a Delrin/POM-type polymer Gold Note calls Sustarin to dampen unwanted vibrations. A good-quality felt mat is provided, while minor vinyl warps can be gently teased using an unthreaded but heavy LP weight. The bearing comprises a hardened chrome steel spindle supported on a 5mm tungsten ball-bearing on a brass seat.

The plinth comprises three layers, the base section being a 60mm-deep, curvaceous laminate of Italian

walnut, selected according to the manufacturer for its elasticity, strength and high density. A 3mm-thick steel plate is placed on top of this, designed both to lower the deck's structural resonance and add extra reinforcement. Finally, this is capped by a 20mm-deep slab of polished black acrylic, which can be a magnet for dust and fingerprints.

Drive is delivered to the platter's periphery via a belt from the high-torque 12V AC synchronous motor, which is powered by Gold Note's compact PST-1 off-board supply. An optional upgrade route presents itself in the shape of the £864 dedicated PST-10 turntable power supply, which includes no more than four transformers, one of which is used as part of a choke filter,

and comes complete with a silver umbilical that connects to the turntable. It is available in black, silver or gold finishes.

On the front left of the acrylic top plate are two low-profile silver buttons for selecting 33 and 45rpm speeds, while a further sequence of button presses allows the user to fine-tune the rotational speed.

The supplied 9in B-5.1 tonearm is entirely handmade in Italy. The armtube and bearing housing are all machined from aluminium, the latter incorporating four high-precision steel bearings made in Germany by GRW. Again, the B-7 Ceramic (£1,591) – which has ceramic ball bearings – offers another possible upgrade path.

Setup is straightforward and fuss free – there's no suspended subchassis to wrestle with – and it's also easy to operate. The steel counterweight can accommodate cartridges with a mass up to 15g, while bias compensation is effected by the usual thread and weight system and easily adjusted by moving the nylon thread along a horizontal scale located at the back of the arm.

As well as the walnut plinth of our review sample, the Mediterraneo is available in black lacquered MDF, white or coated in an exquisitely textured 24k gold foil. It doesn't come with a cartridge so the EAT Jo No5

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Gold Note  
Mediterraneo

**PRICED**  
From £4,990

**ORIGIN**  
Italy

**TYPE**  
Belt-drive turntable

**WEIGHT**  
25kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
470 x 210 x 360mm

**FEATURES**  
● 33 & 45rpm  
● B-5.1 tonearm  
● PST-1 PSU

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Audio Pinnacle

**TELEPHONE**  
01420 544140

**WEBSITE**  
goldnote.it

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 461



pick-up is employed, feeding a PS Audio Stellar phono stage and Naim NAC82/NAP250 amps driving ATC's SCM40 loudspeaker.

## Sound quality

From the start, the Mediterraneo's calling card is rock-solid stability. That's not to suggest it's by any means neutral in its presentation, instead painting a sonic picture that is deeply appealing and draws you into its own vision of the world.

Spinning Deacon Blue's *When The World Knows Your Name*, the snare that opens *Queen Of The New Year* reveals the delivery to be warm but powerful, even if the strike of the sticks lacks the sheer staccato attack and impact heard via the very best

turntables. Meanwhile, the bass guitar is appropriately plump and full while vocals are conveyed with warmth and richness.

The stereo image is expansive, with the Gold Note setting up a wide and deep soundscape within which instruments are securely defined with a reach-out-and-touch-them presence. On *The World Is Lit By Lightning*, percussive effects and rim shots career around the room, drawing the ear right to the edges of the soundstage. You certainly wouldn't describe it as incisive, but bathed in the Florentine glow of the Mediterraneo, the streets of Glasgow described on the album have never felt quite so warm and inviting.

The resident orchestra of Amsterdam's Concertgebouw performing Beethoven's *Symphony No.6* under the baton of Bernard Haitink is a recording in which the string section enjoys exceptional sweetness. The Mediterraneo dutifully captures the delightful string tones during the quieter sections, while the majestic swells possess a wonderful acoustic ambience without ever sounding strident or harsh. This recording is notable for its lack of pinpoint imaging, but the orchestra sounds just as I would imagine it in the hall, ranged across a wide concert stage without undue spotlighting of individual instruments. Despite this, a little fine detail is lost to the warm euphony of the deck's presentation.

Piano always presents a fine test of a turntable's pitch stability and even with the standard PSU in use there is a sense of exemplary control and grip on Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody On A Theme Of Paganini* performed by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Switching from the standard PSU to the aforementioned PST-10 delivers no immediate benefit to speed stability, but does reveal a little more detail in the recording. The sense of hammers hitting piano strings, the sheer mechanical force and impetus

of the playing and the rich tonality of the stringed instruments in *Variation 18* all reach a higher level with the PST-10 taking charge.

Dynamic light and shade improve too, so that gradations and accents in Rubinstein's performance are conveyed with greater authority – from *pianissimo* to *fortissimo*.

Van Morrison's *Avalon Sunset* also provides a perfect demonstration of the potential of Gold Note's flagship turntable with its power supply upgrade. On opening track *Wherever God Shines His Light* Morrison's vocals come across as more transparent, or less syrupy, while the punchy drum and percussion sounds are far more crisply delineated. The tympani playing softly in the background of *Contacting My Angel* is conveyed with

## Bass guitar is plump and vocals are conveyed with warmth and richness

wonderful warmth and solidity, while the electric and acoustic guitars enjoy fine clarity and dynamics.

Finally there's the glorious brass section on *I'd Love To Write Another Song...* Bold, occasionally strident (precisely as brass should be) the fabulous exuberance of its interjections propel the song along with real swing, making for a glorious listening experience.

## Conclusion

Gold Note's Mediterraneo is a fine turntable that, unlike some at this price point, is a fit-and-forget vinyl solution. Its excellent build, elegant looks and sumptuous sound quality offer an appealing proposition, while the fact that there are options for getting more out of it with optional extras further down the line makes it all the more appealing. **HFC**



## Hi-FiChoice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Simple setup; rock-solid stability; Upgrade options

**DISLIKE:** Standard PSU lacks the detail of the upgrade

**WE SAY:** Combining avant-garde tech with Italian aesthetics, this is a highly impressive vinyl spinner



## MoFi UltraDeck+M

A spin-off from Mobile Fidelity's record label, this range-topping turntable package has plenty to get vinylistas in a spin

**B**ack in the early days of music reproduction, it was common to see the same name on your vinyl as on your replay equipment. RCA, Decca, EMI, Philips and many others operated successfully as producers of audio components/systems as well as recording labels. Although several hardware manufacturers have made steps into recorded media with music labels such as Naim and Linn, today it's relatively uncommon for a record label to move the other way. In 2016 record label Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab announced it was to introduce a line of turntables, tonearms, cartridges and accessories under the MoFi Electronics brand.

The UltraDeck+M is the flagship turntable package. The design has

considerable input from Allen Perkins of Spiral Groove and comes with a MasterTracker moving-magnet cartridge for £2,500. Also available are the UltraDeck+ with UltraTracker moving-magnet cartridge for £2,300 and the UltraDeck without cartridge for £2,000.

The belt-drive design uses a synchronous AC motor driving the periphery of the platter via a long rubber belt. The Delrin pulley has two steps for the manually applied speed change, and the platter is also Delrin and tips the scales at 3kg. The material was chosen for its good mechanical impedance match to vinyl and so no mat is needed. The platter spins on an inverted hardened steel bearing, meaning it protrudes from the plinth and the platter is lowered over it. This

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
MoFi UltraDeck+M

**PRICED**  
£2,500

**ORIGIN**  
USA

**TYPE**  
Belt-driven  
turntable package

**WEIGHT**  
10.5kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
500 x 152 x 362mm

**FEATURES**  
• 33 & 45rpm  
• Supplied with  
MoFi MasterTracker  
MM cartridge

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Karma-AV Ltd.

**TELEPHONE**  
01423 358846

**WEBSITE**  
karma-av.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 459

puts the centre of rotation at or below the bearing point rather than above it, and theoretically offers greater rotational stability.

The simple-looking plinth is based around the principle of constrained layer damping. There are three aluminium plates inside – one each for the motor, bearing and arm base – which are bonded to the main MDF body but isolated from each other. This all sits on four adjustable isolation feet, designed by Michael Latvis of Harmonic Resolution Systems.

**The treble has a veneer of polish and sophistication that is quite remarkable**

The UltraDeck's 10in tonearm is supported in both planes by high quality ball bearings, while Cardas internal wiring terminates in a pair of phono sockets on the rear. The arm is fully adjustable for height and cartridge azimuth and has a rubber o-ring between the armtube and the headshell for additional isolation. The arm's effective mass is a high 30g, making it only really suitable for lower compliance cartridges.

The MasterTracker MM cartridge design is based around a V-Twin dual

magnet generator assembly to mirror the design of a lathe's stereo cutter head. It has a mass of 9.7g and has a Micro Linear stylus. Unusually for an MM design, the stylus is not replaceable as MoFi feels this could compromise its alignment.

Fit and finish is superb and the yellow belt and on/off switch are fine stylistic touches. A dustcover is supplied and pivots on simple plastic hinges.

The deck is placed on an Atacama Equinox rack and connected to an Anatek MMC phono stage feeding a Naim Supernait amplifier and Mowgan Audio Ogmia loudspeaker. A 367g Super Heavy Weight record platter clamp (£200) has been supplied by MoFi and is also used.

## Sound quality

If you are considering buying the UltraDeck make sure you pay out the extra £200 and invest in the clamp, and if you already own an UltraDeck and don't have a clamp, be sure to go and invest in one. This seemingly innocuous addition has an astonishing effect on performance – turning it from a merely superb player into a quite remarkable one. Without it, the vinyl slips easily on the platter and applying a cleaning brush to an LP can bring it to a halt immediately. Adding the Super Heavy Weight locks the vinyl down, and seemingly does the same to the sound. Without it, the introduction to the title track of Steve Earle's *Copperhead Road* has a pleasing punch to the kick drum, but a slight splashiness across the top end. Place the clamp on the platter, however, and that top end gains clarity and focus and the drum beats start to rattle my internal organs.

The low end of the UltraDeck is a thing of real beauty. It gives basslines a sense of rock-solid stability, while capturing every scrap of detail. As well as the aforementioned kick drums, the UltraDeck pours forth upper bass detail with a sense of ease and skill that is usually the preserve of much dearer designs. Bass guitars have real depth, form and languid

tunefulness to them and hard-hitting synth basslines are snappy, taut and rhythmically perfect. On occasion it has the timing and precision of a direct-drive deck.

At the top end, the UltraDeck is equally well detailed, but with a

## The MasterTracker MM cartridge mirrors the design of a lathe's stereo cutter head

balance that tends to err towards smoothness. Don't for minute think it's dull, though, as nothing could be further from the truth. With the clamp in place, the treble has a veneer of polish and sophistication that is quite remarkable and usually the preserve of MC cartridges. I briefly swap the MasterTracker for my Ortofon 2M Black cartridge and the tonal balance changes slightly, but it brings no extra advantage in clarity or frequency range. In terms of midband clarity, the UltraDeck+M

scores a full house once again. Instruments are beautifully rendered and positioned perfectly within a capacious yet well-ordered soundstage. Even better, vocals have an exceptional sense of air, space and, above all, realism. Playing Let's Eat Grandma's *Donnie Darko* gives the UltraDeck+M a real chance to shine. Rosa Walton's vocals are projected out into the room perfectly and the backing guitar work has just the right amount of edge to it. Add in a thundering synth bassline and the composure it maintains as the track draws to its crescendo is difficult to better at this – or any – price.

## Conclusion

Given its development connections, I had a feeling MoFi's UltraDeck would be good, but am astonished by just how capable it is as it delivers plenty of bang for your buck at the price. Just make sure that you factor in the extra cost of the record clamp. **AS**

**The distinctive yellow drive belt gives the MoFi a touch of class**



## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

<b>SOUND QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>LIKE:</b> Clarity and insight; superb bass; build quality
<b>VALUE FOR MONEY</b> ★★★★★	<b>DISLIKE:</b> Hinges feel a bit feeble for the weight of the lid
<b>BUILD QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>WE SAY:</b> An incredibly accomplished turntable package that sounds magnificent
<b>FEATURES</b> ★★★★★	

### OVERALL





## Pro-Ject Debut Carbon EVO

The current flagship of the Debut range impresses by packing an enviable specification into a compact form



Over the course of its more than 20 years of existence, the Pro-Ject Debut has transformed from plucky upstart into a range of turntables that no longer represent the most affordable members of the Pro-Ject range, but are instead affordable all-rounders that balance simplicity and ease of use with the scope for a bit of upgrade 'stretch' when you fancy it.

The EVO improves upon the spec of the earlier Debut Carbon (HFC 361). All the defining characteristics of the Debut line; 8.6in tonearm, belt drive and unsuspended plinth are present as they have been in the past, but each has been tweaked in the pursuit of an improved performance.

The tonearm is the same effective length as before, but the single-piece

carbon armtube now has sapphire bearings and upgraded internal wiring. Unlike the arms previously fitted to more affordable Pro-Ject turntables, both tracking force and antiskate are fully adjustable, allowing any cartridge that works with the effective height of the arm to be fitted. For UK models, an Ortofon 2M Red comes supplied as standard.

The motor and platter arrangements have also been augmented. The platter is constructed from steel and has a TPE damping ring applied to the inner edge, which makes it much more inert than Debut platters of old. This sits on a sub-platter that the belt acts upon. The Carbon EVO has electronic speed control as standard and this works via a three-position switch. Press it left for 33rpm, right

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Pro-Ject Debut Carbon EVO

**PRICED**  
£450

**ORIGIN**  
Austria/Czech Republic

**TYPE**  
Unsuspended, belt-drive turntable

**WEIGHT**  
5.6kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
415 x 118 x 320mm

**FEATURES**  
• 33/45/78rpm  
• 8.6in Carbon tonearm  
• Ortofon 2M Red cartridge

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Henley Audio Ltd.

**TELEPHONE**  
01235 511166

**WEBSITE**  
project-audio.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 468

for 45rpm and centre it for off. This works pretty well, although on the review sample selecting 33 results in the platter rotating briefly at a higher speed before settling down, which looks a little odd. It is impressively pitch stable, though, and as 78rpm is also available when using a second belt, flexible too.

Harder to spot but no less useful in performance terms is the work Pro-Ject has put into isolation. The motor is decoupled from the rest of the plinth via a new mount that also makes use of TPE damping. This is partnered with a trio of feet that are both damped and equipped with level adjustment. It might be hard to get truly excited about turntable feet, but this is an area where Pro-Ject probably now has an advantage over any similarly priced rivals. Even the more affordable models have very well-designed feet and Carbon EVO is able to effectively isolate the playing surface almost regardless of what you choose to sit it on.

The appearance is a further reflection of the high quality of engineering involved. At a glance, you can tell it is a Pro-Ject Debut, but the more you study it the more some of the details and tweaks start to become clear. Something that was also apparent on the more affordable T1 (HFC 464) is that the overall



aesthetic has been tidied up so that the Carbon EVO feels clean and modern as a result. The review sample is finished in walnut, but there is a wide selection of colour options available in both gloss and matte finishes including some previously unseen options like Fir Green and Steel Blue. The build quality feels entirely commensurate with the asking price and the setup remains pleasingly straightforward too. Pro-Ject supplies a good-quality grounded interconnect in the box and some tweaks to the packaging and extraction process mean this is probably the easiest Debut turntable to setup I've yet to encounter.

## Sound quality

Connected to a Cyrus Phono Signature (HFC 408) and running into a Chord Electronics CPM2800 MkII integrated amplifier and Kudos Titan 505 standmount speaker (HFC 451), the Pro-Ject does a fine job of disguising its relatively humble origins. Noise levels at idle are commendably low and that admirable pitch stability once running is reflected in absolutely unwavering tone, even on sustained piano notes and other tricky tests.

Indeed, the tonal realism across a wide spread of material is extremely good. The gorgeous *Night & Day*

by Jon Allen is delivered with its emotional content very much at the forefront of the presentation. Allen's slightly rough vocal edge is well reproduced and the placement of him and his guitar is believable and possessed of a sense of scale that switches effortlessly between something small and intimate like this and the rather more ambitious output of the Hidden Orchestra.

Part of this ability stems from the impressive bass response. The Debut has improved considerably in this regard over the years and the Carbon EVO is the best manifestation yet. The hefty low end of Dead Can Dance's *Dionysus* is reproduced with genuine force, but never to the extent of it dominating the rest of the frequency response or lacking in control and cohesion. I'd venture so far as to say that this is some of the best analogue bass you can currently get your hands

## It's easy to setup and use, well made and unfussy about where you place it

on for under £500 and it puts the Pro-Ject above many equivalently priced rivals.

I'm also impressed by the balance between accuracy and emotional content that it delivers. Without ever feeling anything other than consistently believable, it finds the angst and anguish in Christine And The Queens' *What's-Her-Face*, while capturing the very personal nature of the lyrics for vocalist Héloïse Letissier. The Carbon EVO never leaves you a simple onlooker to material, instead it involves and demands your attention in a way that is fairly unusual for such a relatively affordable design.

The foibles of the turntable by contrast are commendably limited. With a more aggressive pressing like *The Desired Effect* by Brandon Flowers, the Pro-Ject makes it clear that this is not a great piece of mastering. Some of this is down to the 2M Red cartridge that is bundled as standard. The Ortofon is a capable but somewhat unforgiving device and the Carbon EVO delivers its performance in an entirely unembellished way. Happily, the simple expedient of switching to a 2M Blue stylus (HFC 375), which I've always found to be a little sweeter in its presentation, significantly reduces, if not eliminates this and so represents a simple enough upgrade for any would-be owner.

The other aspect of the Carbon EVO's performance is rather more subjective and intentional. Even when listening to something effortlessly upbeat like Public Service Broadcasting's *Inform – Educate –, Entertain*, this is a device that flows rather than delivering in-your-face-style immediacy. This seems to be something of a house sound for the brand and, while it can leave really energetic music feeling like it needs a fraction more oomph to truly deliver, the flip side is that it further boosts its 'all-rounder' attributes as there's very little in the way of equivalently priced equipment that I can't see it gelling very well with. A short stint connected to a more price comparative Rega io (p85) and Triangle Borea BR03 (HFC 466) sees the Carbon EVO compliment this duo exceptionally well. The spaciousness of the Pro-Ject's presentation in particular is ideal for increasing the limited soundstage of smaller and more affordable speakers.

## Conclusion

What this equates to is a turntable that is staggeringly competent. This is a level of performance that generally hasn't featured as part of the (inflation-adjusted) sub-£500 price bracket before and it is a convincing demonstration to rivals that Pro-Ject is very much one of the top dogs in this area. In the Debut Carbon EVO, you get a turntable that is easy to setup and use, well made and finished and impressively unfussy about where you place it. Having delivered on being painless to live with, it goes on to provide a performance that is the easy equal of any remotely price-equivalent rival and that is sufficiently even handed that I cannot see it doing anything other than impressing in most systems. The Debut series might be over 20 years old, but there's plenty of life in the line yet. **ES**

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

<b>SOUND QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>LIKE:</b> Extremely well balanced sonic performance; spec
<b>VALUE FOR MONEY</b> ★★★★★	<b>DISLIKE:</b> Fractional lack of rhythmic engagement
<b>BUILD QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>WE SAY:</b> Outstanding addition to the sub-£500 turntable market and arguably the new class of the field
<b>FEATURES</b> ★★★★★	

### OVERALL



The logo for GIAURALiC, featuring a large orange 'G' and 'I' with the word 'AURALiC' in white lowercase letters in between.

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# Pro-Ject The Classic Evo

**O** riginally built to celebrate Pro-Ject's 25th anniversary, The Classic has evolved into the Evo, delivering a selection of improvements without changing its overall design principles. It utilises a suspended sub-chassis, which keeps the motor detached from the playing surface to reduce noise and interference. The downside is that traditionally the two separate chassis needed a complex suspension to keep them apart – making for an arduous setup process.

Pro-Ject has managed to neatly side step this by using a sextet of Thermo Plastic Elastomer (TPE) spheres, which offer the isolation needed. The sub-platter is now made of the same aluminium alloy as the main platter, which rests on it via a layer of TPE damping. This effectively controls resonance between the two sections and results in an impressively inert playing surface.

There is an electronic speed control offering 33, 45 and 78rpm via a pair of speed selection buttons. Other areas that have undergone a major change are the tonearm and cartridge. The former is the latest-spec version of the 9in carbon fibre arm. Taking a thin-walled aluminium tube, it's wrapped in carbon fibre weave to add strength and rigidity. The bearing housing has been updated and there is a chromed counterweight that is damped with TPE.

The supplied cartridge is the Quintet Red. It has a bonded elliptical stylus combined with a coil that acts on neodymium magnets. These are placed in a thermoplastic body, which comes pre-mounted on the arm.

## Sound quality

Poppy Ackroyd's *Quail* is presented with an effortless appreciation of space and scale. The low noise floor ensures that even the quieter passages are packed full of the detail and dynamics that renders the two musicians a believable presence. Meanwhile, when the scale of the music expands, there is no appreciable sense of compression.

Goldfrapp's *Silver Eye* demonstrates that The Classic Evo has excellent low-end extension. The pounding *Systemagic* has a bass weight that can be felt as much as heard and great integration with the upper registers. It is here that The Classic Evo starts to demonstrate a degree of character to its performance. It surges through uptempo music with an energy that keeps you listening and engaged rather than being a passive observer.

The more intense the music, the more compelling this effect becomes. Bob Seger's *Hollywood Nights* is almost visceral in its intensity. Seger's vocals never overpower the fantastic drumming and the soulful turn from the piano. The performance is evocative without being nostalgic and

it is borderline impossible to sit there passively while it happens.

The revised sub-platter imparts more propulsive force, while elements of its performance have more in common with larger models, with their very heavy platter arrangements. The other area where there is a very significant step forward is the tonal realism on offer and this is largely down to the cartridge. The Quintet Red sits gently but firmly on the brighter side of neutral and though in some circumstances results in an edgy performance, especially with poorer pressings, here those adverse qualities are almost completely avoided.

## Conclusion

There wasn't a lot wrong with the original Classic, but in its Evo form, Pro-Ject has managed to extract more performance without affecting the things it did so well. This is a superbly made, well-priced and very handsome deck that delivers a consistently satisfying musical performance with a wide selection of material. Pro-Ject's mission to produce a turntable for all seasons continues apace. **ES**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Pro-Ject The Classic Evo  
**PRICE**  
£1,250  
**ORIGIN**  
Austria/Czech Republic  
**TYPE**  
Belt-drive turntable  
**WEIGHT**  
10.5kg  
**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
462 x 131 x 351mm  
(with lid closed)  
**FEATURES**  
• 33, 45 and 78rpm  
• 9in carbon fibre tonearm  
• Ortofon Quintet Red Cartridge  
**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Henley Audio Ltd.  
**TELEPHONE**  
01235 511166  
**WEBSITE**  
project-audio.com  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC 462

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Propulsive and engaging sound; well made; attractive and easy to install  
**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Fiddly anti-skate  
**BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **WESAY:** A superbly conceived update that keeps the positive qualities while boosting performance  
**FEATURES**  
★★★★★

### OVERALL





# Vertere DG-1

Vertere's DG-1 combines a unique tonearm with plug-and-play ease. But how does it fare alongside its latest phono stage?

**I**n 2006, Touraj Moghaddam left Roksan to set up Vertere and initially focussed on audio cables. But the lure of vinyl was too strong and in 2013 the company released its first record player, the RG-1, which currently retails for £21,500. More affordable models followed and the DG-1 is the new baby of the range, coming in at £2,750 complete with dedicated arm and a Vertere D-Fi interconnect cable. An extra £100 adds the Vertere Magneto cartridge.

The DG-1's distinctive platter consists of three layers – the central core is machined aluminium alloy, which has bonded to its underside a layer of material that is a mixture of cork, Neoprene and nitrile rubber. This controls resonance and damps

the platter, which is then topped by a thermoplastic polymer layer that is used as a mat. This is stylish, well finished and has two small dots printed onto it for cartridge alignment.

The Groove Runner arm is flat rather than tubular. As per Vertere's other tonearms it does not rotate on the usual metal ball bearings. Instead, vertical and horizontal movement is achieved through hundreds of twisted micro-fine nylon threads. Tracking force is applied by a stainless steel rear counterweight, augmented by a fine adjustment weight between the bearing and headshell. This means the arm is a little 'wobblier' than most and requires care when setting up.

All of this resides on a plinth that comprises two coloured acrylic layers with a clear layer between. Within

## ► DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Vertere DG-1  
**PRICED**  
From £2,750  
**ORIGIN**  
UK  
**TYPE**  
Belt drive turntable  
**WEIGHT**  
8kg  
**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
469 x 384 x 130mm  
**FEATURES**  
• 33 and 45rpm  
• DG-1 Groove Runner tonearm  
• Magneto MM cartridge  
**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Vertere Ltd.  
**TELEPHONE**  
0203 1764888  
**WEBSITE**  
vertereacoustics.com  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC 463

this is a silicon-based suspension that decouples the main plinth from the sub-plinth. An acrylic dust cover is supplied. Operation is simplicity itself with one illuminated button pushed sequentially to select 33rpm (green illumination), 45rpm (red) and a longer press for off. Even longer presses also program a layer of plinth illumination LEDs to be always on, off or on only when in standby.

The Magneto cartridge is an MM design based on Audio-Technica's AT-VM520EB. It has a bonded 0.3 x 0.7mm elliptical stylus and aluminium cantilever. It tracks at a nominal 2g and has an output of 4.5mV, so should match easily with any MM phono stage you care to connect it to. Even better, it retains full compatibility with the styli used in the rest of the AT-VM5xx range. Consequently, you can upgrade at a later date to the heights of the MicroLinear one fitted to the AT-VM540ML should you wish.

Vertere has also supplied the MkII version of the Phono-1 phono stage (£1,000). Available with a silver, semi-matt black or fancy orange fascia, it only has one in and output but can cater for a huge range of cartridges thanks to its 15 load resistance, 9 load capacitance and 10 gain settings. These options are selected using an array of PCB-mounted DIP switches accessed via the underside of the



At the bass end of the spectrum, the DG-1 and Phono-1 MkII dig deeply, but don't think for a moment that it is all bang and thump – the low end has a precision and detail that is absolutely magnificent. The main synth bass notes on Christine And The Queens' *Girlfriend* rumble ominously from my loudspeaker with real intent, but free of any sense of wallow or hesitancy, while the backing bass guitar line that is tucked subtly behind this skips along with a real lightness of touch.

Give the deck something with a bit more *joie de vivre* and it rises to the challenge superbly. The punchy drum beats from David Axelrod's *Holy Thursday* hammer across with impact and precision. Every strike arrives with a snappy sense of timing and is furnished with a properly physical sense of stick-on-skin impact; the result is spectacularly realistic.

## The Phono-1 MkII's unforced and natural treble performance is an utter delight

case. They are fiddly, awkward to access and you must remember to make each of your settings twice as there is a set for each channel. Awkward though this is, it's still an improvement on the original MkI – on which you had to remove the lid to make changes. Helpfully, the settings are printed on the case beside the switches, so at least you don't have to go hunting for the manual every time you want to make an alteration.

As a final flourish, and to allow the full capabilities of both deck and phono stage to be explored, Vertere has also supplied an MC cartridge that it feels works well on the DG-1 – the £900 Goldring Ethos (HFC 449).

### Sound quality

I hook the DG-1 up into my regular Naim Supernait amplifier and PMC twenty5.24 loudspeaker and have on hand my regular Anatek MMC phono stage to get a feel for the turntable on its own, and for a point of reference for the Phono-1 MkII.

Instantly impressive is the fact that it is not a recalcitrant turntable by any means. It knows exactly what it needs to do and consequently takes the performance, brushes aside any rough edges and serves up the overall musical message with a confidence and assurance that is quite superb, and like little else at its price level.

I also find myself rather taken by the soundstage that the DG-1 and Phono-1 MkII generate. Again, the word 'solid' comes to mind, and the pairing has a masterful way of bringing the main performers from the plane of the loudspeaker and out into the room towards me. With one or two tracks I play, there is an almost 'reach-out-and-touch' sense of realism. Swapping between the Phono-1 and my Anatek I realise that, although the latter is a brilliant unit that I have used for years, the Phono-1 seems to gently take it aside and ever so politely point out a couple of areas where there is room for improvement, mainly in terms of front-to-back stage depth and performer placement.

Even better, the Vertere combo's mastery of space and depth seems completely independent of musical type. Kari Bremnes' vocals from *A Lover In Berlin* are right in front of me while the bassline is once again deep and sinuous, and the percussion seems to be neatly arranged around my equipment rack. The final flourish is the oft-challenging piano, which is rich and resonant.

The best news is that this is topped off with a top end that feels class leading. Treble detail is impeccable and the combination of the Audio-Technica-based cartridge and Groove Runner arm works beautifully. The result is a treble performance that

really could convince you that the instrument is in the room with you. It's not just a good representation of it – the DG-1 and Phono-1 MkII really seem to bring it to life. That said, I feel duty bound to break the seal on the Goldring Ethos MC to see how much further the combo can go.

When fitted onto the Groove Runner, the Ethos proves to be a formidable transducer. Even better, the flexibility of the Phono-1 MkII means it's easy to get the best out of it. Through my Anatek phono stage with its fixed 100ohm loading, the Goldring sounds good, but a little politer than I'd ideally like. Moving to the Vertere unit and bringing that loading value down to the 78ohm setting gives it a lovely touch of sparkle that really shows the whole setup at its best. Tracking is secure without any hint of uncertainty and the midband takes on a sense of emotion and insight that is truly moving with the right material. Swapping back to the Magneto shows this is still a very capable cartridge and one which is worthy of recommendation on its own merit. Vertere has chosen its matching packaged transducer very well indeed. However, the Goldring Ethos makes it clear that the DG-1 and Phono-1 MkII have much more to give.

### Conclusion

The Vertere DG-1 sets something of a new standard. While the integrated tonearm and pre-fitted cartridge effectively mean it is a 'plug-and-play' design, it still requires a little more care with its setup than one or two of its competitors. Make this effort and the rewards are astonishing. The Phono-1 MkII is a similarly superb piece of design easily top of the tree at its price point. Its unforced and natural treble performance in particular is a delight. Put the two together and you may well have the vinyl bargain of the year. **ES**

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

<b>SOUND QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>LIKE:</b> Superb bass, dynamics and treble
<b>VALUE FOR MONEY</b> ★★★★★	<b>DISLIKE:</b> Gain/loading DIP switches
<b>BUILD QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>WESAY:</b> Two massively capable units in their own right combine to give a stunning performance
<b>FEATURES</b> ★★★★★	

### OVERALL





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 Warranty



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 Warranty



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### Atacama 4-Shelf Hi-Fi Stand Evoque Eco SE2

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- Sonic Isolation System Technology
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2 Year Warranty

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Warranty

**Sonus faber**

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### Sonus Faber Passive Loudspeakers Olympica Nova V



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- 32 Hz – 35.000 Hz frequency response
- Olympica Nova I, II & III also available

£14,900 /pair

5 Year  
Warranty

**Sonus faber**

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AVAILABLE IN  
WALNUT  
OR WENGÉ

### Sonus Faber Passive Loudspeakers Sonetto V



- 3-Way floorstanding loudspeaker
- 38 Hz – 25.000 Hz frequency response
- Sonetto I, II, III & VIII also available

£4,300 /pair

5 Year  
Warranty

**Sonus faber**

IN STOCK

AVAILABLE IN  
BLACK, WHITE,  
WALNUT  
OR WENGÉ

### Sonus Faber Passive Loudspeakers Lumina III



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WALNUT  
OR WENGÉ

- 3-Way floorstanding loudspeaker
- 40 Hz – 24.000 Hz frequency response
- Lumina I also available: £799 /pair

£1,999 /pair

5 Year  
Warranty

**Sonus faber**

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Warranty

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# AnthemSTR IntegratedAmplifier

**N**otably tall and deep, the STR is the very epitome of no-nonsense styling, but while the plain casework doesn't exactly shout high-end stereo amplifier, it is reassuringly beefy.

The complexity of the rear panel is in stark contrast to the simplicity of the front. Connectivity is generous with analogue inputs running to four unbalanced RCAs and a single balanced stereo via XLRs, plus dedicated MM and MC phono inputs. Digital inputs include a USB-B, two optical, two coaxial and an AES/EBU along with further digital choices for updates and software control. There are fixed and variable line-level outputs plus dedicated left and right preamp outputs for subwoofers, while the sturdy speaker terminals accept all common connectors and power output is rated at 2x 200W into 8ohm. Anthem Room Correction (ARC) is on hand for analysis of any listening space.

### Sound quality

Playing *Norman F\*\*\*ing Rockwell* by Lana Del Rey is a delight. The piano has real solidity. Mellifluous and warm, yet rich in complex overtones, it has proper body. Piano is notoriously tricky to reproduce yet the Anthem

has both the power and control to give it believable gravity, complete with enough finesse to perfectly capture subtle pedal muting and sustain. Similarly, Del Rey's voice is warm yet vivid, crisp and precise. This is one of those rare beasts that combines power with neutrality, not overtly drawing attention to anything but the recording. Imaging is strong as the amplifier excels in pressing the midband detail forward into a highly compelling soundscape. Bass is fulsome and wonderfully textured and treble is sweet and unfatiguing. With sophisticated DSP tech built-in, the STR automatically converts the analogue phono input stage into a 32-bit/192kHz digital feed. In this mode I can apply the room correction curve, adjust rumble filters or tweak EQ and bass levels – yet much as this improves the 'in-room' performance, the sonic image appears flattened a little and in my listening room I prefer the direct analogue feed instead.

Connecting a MacBook Pro to the DAC USB-B port, I can select the STR as my output device. Playing *Comme Un Tango* by Vincent Belanger from Qobuz is a treat. Belanger's playing style celebrates the full visceral impact of the cello and the Anthem

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Anthem STR  
Integrated Amplifier

**PRICE**  
£5,500

**ORIGIN**  
Canada

**TYPE**  
Integrated  
amplifier/DAC

**WEIGHT**  
18kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
432 x 172 x 445mm

**FEATURES**  
• Quoted power  
output: 2x 200W  
(8ohm)  
• 32-bit/384kHz  
PCM and DSD128-  
capable DAC  
• Inputs: 4x stereo  
RCAs; 1x balanced  
XLRs; 2x optical  
digital; 2x coaxial  
digital; 1x AES/ESU;  
1x USB-B

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Pulse Cinemas

**TELEPHONE**  
01279 647039

**WEBSITE**  
anthemav.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 459

does a superb job of conveying the body and heft. Bass is powerful, supple and lithe with real solidity, but never strays into excess. The notes from the bow bounced on the strings are rich in harmonic detail that perfectly captures the technique and recording space. The pure tone of the cello notes is beguiling, overflowing with dark texture, complete with tiny buzzes and slaps from the potent playing style.

### Conclusion

Anthem's STR Integrated Amplifier is generous yet refreshingly understated. It combines power and connectivity with an even-handed and neutral performance. Phono inputs are excellent and the DAC is extremely natural. Straight out of the box it sounds like a pedigree performer, but dive into the advanced Anthem Room Correction measurements and you can fine tune the sound to fit your listening space. Though I thoroughly enjoy experimenting with the DSP sophistication, make no mistake, the beating heart of this amp is its superb analogue signal handling. **CW**

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY



#### VALUE FOR MONEY



#### BUILD QUALITY



#### FEATURES



#### OVERALL



**LIKE:** Generous power and connectivity; phono inputs; highly neutral; ARC correction

**DISLIKE:** Absence of a headphone output

**WE SAY:** No frills on the outside, but plenty of tricks on the inside make the STR a really compelling choice





# Arcam SA30

**F**or its premium integrated, Arcam has borrowed a trick from its home cinema products. Dirac Live is a room optimisation/EQ tool that adds a layer of complexity to setup, but hopes to balance that with a boost in performance. In addition, there's 120W per channel (delivered by Arcam's Class G amplification), and an expanded skillset.

The SA30 integrates Chromecast and Apple AirPlay 2, UPnP streaming via the MusicLife app and MQA playback – all handled by a 32-bit Sabre ESS9038K2M DAC – but turns its nose up at Bluetooth.

Connectivity is generous. On the front are a 3.5mm headphone jack and 3.5mm analogue input; around the rear there's a bank of three stereo audio inputs, MM and MC phono ins, pairs of digital optical and coaxial inputs and Ethernet and USB. A stereo pre-out is provided should you wish to use the SA30 solely as a preamp.

## Sound quality

The SA30 lives up to its flagship billing with a sound that's a heady cocktail of openness, accuracy and power. It sounds constantly in control, with exemplary imaging and a lush sense of space. And Dirac Live has an obvious impact on performance.

Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers' *Mary Jane's Last Dance* has a laid-back vibe that presents the Class G power

plant with no problems, yet the amp still manages to leave its mark, unwrapping the instrumentation to a point where you can place every gently over-driven guitar lick and snare beat, bringing a believable texture and edge to the harmonica. Adding Dirac Live to the mix tightens it up, the acoustic equivalent of applying a spanner to a loose bolt.

Bass integration is likely to be the biggest beneficiary of Dirac, by virtue of the prevalence of room-borne peaks and nulls below 200Hz. Yet an EQ'd SA30 doesn't just showcase a smoother bass response, it sounds more organised in the midrange, too. With the default Dirac target curve applied, there's a cohesive feel to the vocals, piano and guitar in Dire Straits' *Telegraph Road* that isn't there without it. The phrase 'night and day' is merited here. Elements that sounded too forward and bright before, such as the chords from Mark Knopfler's Stratocaster, are smoothed down, but not to the detriment of the overall sound. There's a subjectively linear feel to the performance across the frequency range, as if every element has been put in its right place.

This track is also a fine indicator of its ability to combine delicacy with dynamic attack. As it opens, and Pick Withers' refrained percussion lays on a rhythm, there's a sense of calm and space, with bass notes that are sonorous but defined, and a soundstage

that extends for miles. Get to the extended finale, however, and Withers' more forceful accompaniment and the change in pace demands an amp that can handle the dynamic shifts.

Kvelertak's *Fanden Ta Dette Hull!* mixes Thin Lizzyesque harmonies with furious double-time kick drums and lead guitar pyrotechnics, but the SA30 seems remarkably unfazed by all the surface chaos, unearthing the musicality underneath and driving it forward with glee. Switch to drum and bass floor-filler *Represents* by DJ Brockie & Ed Solo, and it becomes less about nuance and more about sheer rhythmic power, imbuing this lo-fi recording with scale and menace.

## Conclusion

Forward-thinking in terms of features, yet maintaining Arcam's traditional approach to design and build, the SA30 will please both brand loyalists and newcomers. Ostensibly a step up from the SA20, it offers so much more, adding streaming compatibility to purposeful Class G power and icing the cake with game-changing Dirac Live room correction. **MC**

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Arcam SA30

**PRICE**  
£2,000

**ORIGIN**  
UK/China

**TYPE**  
Integrated amplifier

**WEIGHT**  
12kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
433 x 100 x 323mm

**FEATURES**  
• Quoted power output: 2x 120W (8ohm)  
• Inputs: 3x RCA line-level; MM phono; 2x optical; 2x coaxial digital

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Harman International Industries Ltd.

**WEBSITE**  
arcam.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 462

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Muscular, open and detailed sound; connectivity; Dirac Live room correction

**DISLIKE:** MusicLife app is basic; no Bluetooth

**WESAY:** The traditional styling of this superb-sounding integrated hides some state-of-the-art skills



# Copland CSA 100

**U**nlike the Copland amps we've featured in the past – all valve designs – this is a hybrid offering that cunningly combines a preamp that utilises a valve circuit with a solid-state power amp stage. The level of valve involvement in the preamp isn't that high with a solitary Electro-harmonix 6922 dual-triode in the circuit. The power amp is a MOSFET design comprised of bipolar transistors. This is the first time that the company has combined these with valves in the same chassis.

The CSA 100 produces 100W into an 8ohm load and this figure rises to 180W into four. There are three RCA line-level and a single XLR balanced input, which are partnered with a moving-magnet phono stage and a single tape out and variable pre out. The CSA 100 adds a selection of digital inputs too. Making use of an ESS9018 DAC, this adds an optical, coaxial and USB input to the roster. AptX HD Bluetooth is also available as an option and connectivity is finished off by a headphone amp fitted with a 6.35mm jack socket on the front.

## Sound quality

Listening to a 24/88.2 download of The Police's *Outlandos d'Amour* – a fairly thin and edgy piece of mastering – it feels fuller, weightier and altogether richer than it does on other equipment. *So Lonely* still pounds along with the

required urgency and there's no hint of it sounding sluggish or soft. This is not the most ballistic sounding device for the money, but it never goes so far as to sound in anyway slow.

Give it a more polished recording like Sarah Jarosz's *World On The Ground* and it really starts to shine. The implementation of the ESS DAC is very effective, offering superb detail retrieval and excellent tonal accuracy without the slightly sterile edge that can sometimes be part of the package. The wonderful *I'll Be Gone* is delivered with Jarosz's vocals locked to the centre and the supporting instruments sounding crisp and realistic in a believable arrangement around her.

The excellent bass response thunders through Orbital's *Monsters Exist* with real energy and venom. It extracts everything I would expect and a little more besides without losing the detail and control it exhibits over the upper registers.

Without ever sounding diffuse or vague, it manages to take any recording and find space and depth that is not always present when listened to on other devices.

The phono stage is a delight too. There is no unwanted noise at any remotely acceptable domestic listening level and it is completely free of hum and interference. It then builds on these fundamentals with a presentation that takes all the virtues of the digital side, but with a bit more

bite and drive to it. It handles the remastered version of Peter Gabriel's *Up* with tremendous assurance.

In direct contrast, the built-in headphone output is merely good rather than great. It has plenty of gain and manages to balance refinement with energy, but some of the spaciousness falls by the wayside. It's more than capable for occasional use, though. It might be seen as a finishing touch to an amplifier that barely puts a foot wrong otherwise.

## Conclusion

The CSA 100 is a rare beast in hi-fi terms in that it manages to be almost absurdly competent, but never feels dull or soulless in doing so. There's nothing within the extensive specification that feels anything other than exactly thought out, but beyond that it rarely fails to delight across its many inputs and a very broad spectrum of music. Throw in the superb build and rather lovely appearance, and you have an absolutely outstanding amplifier that's likely to delight anyone who spends any time with it. **ES**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Copland CSA 100

**PRICE**  
£3,500

**ORIGIN**  
Denmark

**TYPE**  
Integrated amplifier

**WEIGHT**  
14kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
435 x 135 x 370mm

### FEATURES

- Claimed power output: 2x 100W (8ohm)
- Inputs: 3x stereo RCAs; 1x XLR; MM phono stage
- Digital board: 1x optical; 1x coaxial; 1x USB-B

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Absolute Sounds

**TELEPHONE**  
0208 9713909

**WEBSITE**  
copland.dk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 465

## Hi-FiChoice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Sublime performance; very well made and attractive

**DISLIKE:** Headphone stage isn't quite as good as other inputs

**WE SAY:** A supreme amp that combines an excellent spec with a delightful performance

# 33 Revelations Per Minute



## STUDIODECK +

“ From nowhere to easing past one of the greats is no mean achievement, but the StudioDeck+ package really is that good, displaying an open, lucid, style that's thoroughly addictive and an almost magical ability to make music come alive in a way only the best can. ”

Hi Fi Choice, September 2020



## ULTRAPHONO

“ The MoFi UltraPhono redefines what you get for £500, even if you don't factor in what is a mighty fine headphone section. ”

HiFi News, March 2020

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# Hegel H95

**F**eatures relating to digital streaming have moved on somewhat since Hegel introduced the H90 three years ago. Consequently Spotify Connect and an update for AirPlay2 that the H120 and H190 enjoyed have been carried over to the H95. Specified at a claimed 60W into 8ohm loads, improvements have also been made to the power supplies and headphone output in an effort to reduce noise. Network connectivity comes via the Ethernet input and there is an asynchronous USB-B port plus three optical digital and a single coaxial (RCA) in. Though the balanced analogue inputs that appear further up the range have been eschewed, there is a brace of RCA line inputs alongside a pair for its variable preamp out – so the H95 can be hooked up to an external power amp for bi-amping suitably equipped speakers or for a future system upgrade.

## Sound quality

Any fears that the efforts made to hit a lower price point might have had a negative impact on the ‘Hegelness’ of this integrated’s performance are allayed once it swings into action. The stripped-down instrumentation of The Steve Howe Trio’s *Fair Weather Friend* offers up a powerhouse performance. The guitar takes centre stage with a pleasing snap, while the drums carry persuasive weight and

drive and the joyful Hammond organ skips between the two on the broad, high soundstage. The H95 instantly establishes itself as being firmly in control, detailed and highly refined, while demonstrating a delicious sense of exuberance as it launches enthusiastically into the music.

Moving on from the jazz stylings of the trio, the period instruments of the *Simphonie Du Marais*’ take on Handel’s *Water Music* & *Royal Fireworks* presents an entirely different challenge – one that the H95 bats away with apparent ease. The integrated manages to show a deft touch, nimbly negotiating the dance tunes woven into the piece while bringing out the distinctive character of the contrabasses and hautbois within a rich reverberant church acoustic that gives the music the space it requires to expand and breathe. Throughout the Hegel manages to sound large and stately and things are ramped up even further in the frenetic final section of *Fireworks* while maintaining the presence of the instruments in among the vast cacophony of the drums.

Jason Isbell & The 400 Unit’s *Reunions* does little to take the sheen off of an already deeply impressive performance. The H95 dives deep into the harmonies while ensuring that Isbell’s vocals remain clear and forceful in the mix. Meanwhile, it’s ready to deliver a mighty slam when

the band kicks it up a gear, getting deep into the music when required.

It’d ordinarily be at this point that we’d start the “there is a downside of course...” section of the review, but the fact is that whatever we throw at it, the H95 comes up smelling of roses. Whether it’s called upon to display a lightness and fleetness of foot or hefty scale and power, the results are consistently impressive and it never appears wanting. Whether it’s the infectious horn playing in Sarah Willis’ *Mozart Y Mambo* or the driving guitar of Black Sabbath’s *War Pigs* that’s your bag, the H95 never fails to deliver.

## Conclusion

Combining impressive streaming capability with Hegel’s traditional nous when it comes to making rock-solid integrations, the power, poise and hugely involving presentation of the H95 make it a very impressive proposition for the asking price. Combined with flexibility and simple design, this is the ideal solution for those whose budget doesn’t stretch to the H390. **HFC**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Hegel H95  
**PRICE**  
£1,500  
**ORIGIN**  
Norway  
**TYPE**  
Network-attached integrated amplifier  
**WEIGHT**  
11kg  
**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
430 x 100 x 350mm  
**FEATURES**  
• Quoted power output: 2x 60W (8ohm)  
• Digital inputs: 1x coaxial (RCA); 3x optical; 1x USB-B; Ethernet port  
• Analogue inputs: 2x stereo RCAs  
• 6.35mm headphone output  
**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Hegel Music Systems AS  
**TELEPHONE**  
07917 685759  
**WEBSITE**  
hegel.com  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC 468

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Powerful, detailed performance

**DISLIKE:** Nothing at the price

**WE SAY:** Hegel delivers the goods again with simplicity, flexibility and poise at a more affordable price



Scandinavian design flair and high performance  
for system builders from entry level up...

Legend 40, Hi Fi News August 2020

**EISA**  
AWARD

**Best Product**  
2020-2021

WIRELESS LOUDSPEAKER

System Audio legend 5 silverback



**karma**  
audio - visual



# Hegel H120

**R**eplacing Röst (*HFC 418*), the new H120's price stays the same, likewise the Class AB configuration rated at 2x 75W and the minimalist aesthetic. Nothing is changed for the sake of it; Hegel just isn't that kind of company. That's not to say Röst wasn't due a digital upgrade.

In the Hegel hierarchy, the H120 slots in between the entry-level H90 (*HFC 427*) and 'next level' H190, just as the Röst did. It has a strategically breathed-on version of the Röst's analogue output stage, but its DAC and digital electronics come from the more powerful and expensive H190 and are described as "reference class".

The rear-panel socketry comprises one coaxial and three optical inputs, a USB-B port for connection to a computer, a pair of balanced XLRs, two pairs of unbalanced RCA line-level inputs, an Ethernet port and a pair of variable unbalanced RCA line-level output jacks. There's also Apple AirPlay, Spotify Connect, IP Control, Control4 and UPnP streaming from DNLA or a NAS drive. It can access music streaming services such as Tidal and internet radio, and Roon compatibility is almost ready to go.

## Sound quality

As a long-term user of the entry-level H90, I'm intrigued to see what the H120 brings to the table. Cueing up Joni Mitchell's original rendition of *A*

*Case Of You* and relying on the respective amps' on-board decoding, the outcome is predictably unkind to the H90, which – while sounding pleasantly smooth and warm – lacks the H120's transparency, temporal precision and dynamic expression, making the track sound slightly muggy. The new amp more accurately captures the pure and sonorous quality of Mitchell's voice and renders the accompanying steel-string guitars with greater bite and harmonic complexity. Using Chord Electronics' Hugo 2 DAC (*HFC 428*) evens things up to a large degree, both amps sounding much more alike, clearly hailing from the house of Hegel and able to make the most of the Chord's sonic charms, though the H120 sounds more refined and energised.

The H120 isn't one of those amps that gives material the sonic equivalent of a makeover. Nothing sounds shinier or more glamorous than it should and a great musical performance is neither hyped nor hindered as it reaches the speaker.

It's a partnership that appears to clear a path for musical expression of a very high calibre that makes listening a captivating rather than casual experience. This seems to be a consistent characteristic whatever the input. Streaming Eels' *Daisies Of The Galaxy*, it has a wonderfully pure and present quality that bypasses the less than gleaming production values.

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Hegel H120

**PRICE**  
£2,200

**ORIGIN**  
Norway

**TYPE**  
Integrated amplifier/DAC

**WEIGHT**  
12kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
430 x 100 x 310mm

### FEATURES

- Quoted power output: 2x 75W (8ohm)
- Digital inputs: 1x coaxial; 3x optical; 1x USB-B; 1x Ethernet port
- Analogue inputs: 1x stereo balanced XLRs; 2x stereo RCAs
- 6.35mm headphone output

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Hegel Music Systems AS

**TELEPHONE**  
07917 685759

**WEBSITE**  
hegel.com

**REVIEWED**  
*HFC 460*

This is not an audiophile-standard recording by any means, yet Mark Oliver Everett's mood-drenched songs swim by in an unerringly fluent, tuneful and enjoyable fashion.

Mike Stern and Jeff Lorber's latest jazz fusion vehicle, *Eleven*, under the H120's command sounds huge, fast, natural and unforced, rhythmically lucid and surefooted. The Hegel does the big picture/fine detail thing better than any amplifier I can think of remotely close to its price. Solidity, scale and authority sit comfortably with the subtlest resolution of detail. Power and deftly delivered dynamics go hand in hand as well, and all with impeccable control, especially in the lower bass frequencies.

## Conclusion

The versatile talent that was the Röst might appear to have left the building, but it hasn't really. Its star quality lives on in the H120, upgraded and buffed for the digital delights of a new decade. It might sit in the lowly part of Hegel's amplifier range, but the H120 delivers as much excellence as many will ever need. **DV**

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Terrific sound quality and across-the-board competence; design and build

**DISLIKE:** No native DSD or MQA support

**WE SAY:** Another highly desirable Hegel that ticks all the boxes and then some

## The first reviews are in for R15 and R35 phono preamps!

### R15 EISA PHONO PREAMP 2020–2021

"Built with the same care the company brings to its main amplifiers, its low-noise design is informed by the flagship R35 model just as its sound is the familiar 'Primare' mix of weight and substance allied to detail and resolution. It's the ideal interface between a high-quality record player and the line input of your amplifier."

*EISA Award Citation, August 2020*



### R15 Hi-Fi Choice – Recommended, Five Stars

"... a precision and focus that doesn't blunt edges, blur textures or drag tempos and presents the solid and the spacious as a coherent whole with the full spectrum of tonal colours and accurately rendered instrumental timbres."

*David Vivian, UK, May 2020*



### R35 Hi-Fi News – Outstanding Product

"Flagship phono stage is an analogue triumph... an incredibly flexible and capable phono stage that seemingly has the ability to extract the very best from any cartridge that crosses its path. A rare feat at any price, this only further pumps up the R35's value."

*Adam Smith, UK, May 2020*



► For more information go to [primare.net](http://primare.net)





# Musical Fidelity M8xi

**E**ssentially a monstrous chassis housing a separate preamp with a pair of monoblock power amplifiers, the M8xi weighs in at a back-breaking 46kg. All this heft adds up to a rather beefy quoted power output of 550W per channel into 8ohm loads – although the reality is it's actually capable of more. Power aside, it packs a TI/Burr-Brown PCM5242 DAC which handles 24-bit/192kHz digital files via its pairs of coaxial and optical inputs and single asynchronous USB-B port around the back. DSD, a headphone output and moving-magnet or coil phono inputs are absent.

Additional connectivity includes four line-level RCA inputs, two balanced XLRs and both coaxial and optical outputs. The preamp outputs are single-ended and balanced and there's also a fixed line out.

## Sound quality

The only place to kick off proceedings is by listening to Massive Attack's *Unfinished Sympathy*. It probably won't come as too much of a spoiler to reveal that the low frequencies sound phenomenal. There's tremendous weight extension and a pneumatic grip over bass notes that power the deepest rhythms up through your feet to the point where you think you're going to lose your fillings. But what's perhaps more of a

surprise is the way that the percussion allows the M8xi to show its dexterity in areas such as resolution of colour, timbre, dynamics and ambience. Meanwhile Shara Nelson's vocals and those stunning orchestral strings ably demonstrate all the lush richness we've come to expect from this epic masterpiece. As it reaches its bombastic conclusion, it's the amplifier's speed that really catches us off guard. The way that all those transient details fly from the speaker with such effortless alacrity, might not be rare at this price, but it's certainly unexpected from an amp of this size.

Wagner's *Symphonic Ring* performed by the Duisburg Philharmonic provides a beautiful illustration of the M8xi's ability to handle weight, scale and zip with unerring accuracy and apparent ease. With harps and flutes vying for attention as 30 violins provide a rousing background, it wouldn't be too much of a surprise if everything got a little lost in the mush of noise. And yet, this fabulously detailed rendering makes it easy to pick out individual, tonally vivid instruments with ease. Somehow, through all this cacophony, the Musical Fidelity barely breaks into a sweat, resolving the lyrical delicacy of the second act with the same deft touch that it does the deep, fast-flowing *Das Rheingold*.

Next it's over to a 24-bit/48kHz version of Diana Krall's *I Can't Tell You Why*. Gone is the heavy verbosity of

what's come before to be replaced by feather-lite delicacy on the brushwork and clockwork precision from the accompanying piano. The depth of detail and natural composure of the performers in a very relaxed acoustic makes for a captivating – if not quite invigorating – experience that's faithful to the tone of the piece.

## Conclusion

For power-hungry obsessives or those that are simply looking for an amp suitably flexible that they can invest in impossibly finickity and insensitive loudspeakers, the M8xi ticks all the right boxes. But to consider it a brute that's solely capable of boom and bombast is to miss the point. In the same way football commentator's say: "He's got a surprisingly good touch for a big man" if any forward over six feet tall shows a semblance of ball control, this is just as comfortable precisely replicating the smaller lighter details as it is the big stuff. Fast, flexible and impressively faithful to the recording, it's a superb amplifier and deserves to be right near the top of any wishlist. **HFC**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Musical Fidelity  
M8xi

**PRICE**  
£5,650

**ORIGIN**  
Austria

**TYPE**  
Integrated amplifier

**WEIGHT**  
46kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
485 x 180 x 500mm

**FEATURES**  
• Quoted power output: 550W (8ohm)  
• Inputs: 4x RCA; 2x XLR; 2x optical; 2x coaxial; USB port  
• Outputs: 1x RCA; 1x pre-out; 1x XLR; 1x coaxial; 1x optical

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Henley Audio Ltd.

**TELEPHONE**  
01235 511166

**WEBSITE**  
henleyaudio.co.uk  
musicalfidelity.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 465

## Hi-FiChoice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY



**LIKE:** Supreme power; fine detail; faithfulness to original source

#### VALUE FOR MONEY



**DISLIKE:** It's huge and pretty heavy; USB not as good as other inputs

#### BUILD QUALITY



**WE SAY:** Given the size, it's no surprise the M8xi can go loud, but it's dexterity certainly is

#### FEATURES



#### OVERALL



marantz



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# Naim

## Nait XS 3

**A**s the name suggests, the Nait XS 3 is an ongoing evolution of the original Nait XS integrated and compared with several amplifier designs currently available on the market, this third-generation model looks a little on the simplistic side. The power output is quoted at 2x 70W into 8ohm and it provides four line-level inputs via RCA as well as DIN connections for use with Naim sources. There are no digital inputs and unlike some rivals at this price, no option to add them as an upgrade

**The deep, clean bass perfectly matches the smooth, spacious upper registers**

further down the line. There is, however, a headphone amp via a 6.35mm socket on the front panel.

Unlike its predecessor, the XS 3 incorporates a moving-magnet phono stage and Naim is adamant that the care taken with its implementation and design ensures best-in-class performance along with a number of revisions to the pre and power amplifier stages. Further performance upgrades can be achieved by investing in one of Naim's external power supplies.

The Nait XS 3 possibly isn't exactly the most eye-catching chassis, but it is

handsome and well proportioned. It's beautifully made and the familiar casework feels solid and carefully assembled. It comes supplied with £100 Power-Line Lite mains cables (HFC 427) as standard, while the remote control is sensibly laid out and has a solid feel to it.

### Sound quality

The test level is easily reached and the Nait XS 3 has plenty of output power in reserve. The most noticeable aspect of the performance, however, is the vastly improved sense of space and three dimensionality over its predecessor. The effect this has on Hugh Masekela's performance of *Stimela* is significant as the Naim does a great job of creating a believable space, clearly differentiating between the audience and the band. It demonstrates the same attributes with instruments too, with Masekela's trumpet solo sounding vibrant and entirely believable.

This dovetails with more traditional Naim virtues of rhythmic energy and ebullience that consistently entertain.

The result is that it handles Huey Lewis' *Walking On A Thin Line* with a genuine sense of fun and enthusiasm that is highly entertaining. It also shows an impressively forgiving nature with the upper registers, although it doesn't have the ability to define the locations of Lady Gaga and Tony Bennett's *Cheek To Cheek*

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Naim Nait XS 3

**PRICE**  
£2,200

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**TYPE**  
Integrated amplifier

**WEIGHT**  
8.5kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
432 x 70 x 314mm

**FEATURES**  
● Quoted power output: 2x 70W (8ohm)  
● Inputs: 4x RCA; 5x DIN; 1x MM phono stage  
● 6.35mm headphone socket

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Naim Audio Ltd.

**TELEPHONE**  
01722 426600

**WEBSITE**  
naimaudio.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 459

with the total assurance of some rivals. Having said that, it still manages to deliver the track with plenty of get up and go.

Aurora Aksnes' rendition of *The River* is also delivered brilliantly, with a deep clean bass extension that perfectly matches the smooth and spacious upper registers.

Moving to the built-in phono stage reveals that the Nait XS 3 has a consistent character to its line-level inputs. Noise levels at idle are fractionally higher than some rivals, but once the music is playing, this ceases to be an issue and the Naim delivers a performance that consistently allows the positive attributes of whatever turntable is connected to shine through.

### Conclusion

Unfailingly brilliant regardless of style of music, the Nait XS 3 is beautifully made, highly attractive, easy to use and boasts a decent MM phono stage should you wish to jump aboard the vinyl bandwagon, which all adds up to a highly versatile and enticing integrated at the price. **ES**

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

##### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

##### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

##### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

##### FEATURES

★★★★★

##### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Lively, refined and spacious performance; exceptional build

**DISLIKE:** No digital inputs

**WE SAY:** Not the best specified amp, but it delivers a consistently excellent performance that brings music to life





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SPENDOR A7



# Norma Audio Revo IPA-140

**C**laiming 140W into 8ohm from six MOSFETs per channel, this integrated is effectively a fully dual mono configuration of the Revo IPA-70B(HFC 455). Alongside extra power, it also boasts discrete power supplies for gain, driver and output stages. Connectivity includes four line-level RCA inputs, one RCA out and a single XLR balanced input, while the optional DAC module with a USB-B input has been included. The optional phono stage is also here and comes set for MM, but can be reconfigured for a variety of MC carts.

## Sound quality

Playing Vivaldi's *Gloria in D major* by the Choir of Kings College Cambridge, the opening strings create a rich backdrop full of dynamic energy and warmth that paints a compelling image of the vast acoustic space. The chorus rises from the deep soundstage as a near tsunami of positive emotion. Lesser amps will make their excuses and bow out, but this feels completely unburstable – easily communicating the huge dynamic swings and majestic scale of the chorus at full tilt. Where some rivals flaunt simple watts, Norma Audio extols current delivery and peak power handling. This is a big performance that balances huge, sweeps of lush instrumentation and voices with masterful attention to detail, delivering massive scale

alongside a feeling of intimacy and presence that you are in the chapel with real performers.

Spinning *More Money* by Barry Reynolds on vinyl reveals the phono stage is a class act in its own right. The track feels more spacious than usual, enabling me to delight in the chemistry between performers. The bass has real body and propulsion, with the amp conveying both vivid textural detail alongside flowing, natural timing that effortlessly drives the song forward.

The track has extra depth than I'm used to, with tiny guitar licks, layered percussion effects and subtle nuances in the vocal delivery all having more credible air and space around them. Top to bottom the Revo IPA-140 conveys sweet treble that never feels grating, a sublime midband that projects singers forward as fully rounded human beings and a physical bass that still remains fast and agile.

I connect my MacBook Pro and swap to the DAC input playing Rae Morris singing Bowie's *Moonage Daydream*. Given the amp is designed by a measurement specialist and has a claimed bandwidth of 2MHz, one might expect the DAC section to be dry or businesslike, yet its character is visceral and alive. The opening piano has fantastic heft and body. The image is stable, three dimensional and utterly compelling, complete with rich layers of overtones and harmonics.

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Norma Audio Revo IPA-140  
**PRICE**  
£6,635  
**ORIGIN**  
Italy  
**TYPE**  
Integrated amplifier  
**WEIGHT**  
25kg  
**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
430 x 125 x 430mm  
**FEATURES**  
• Quoted power output: 2x 140W (8ohm)  
• Inputs: 4x stereo analogue RCAs; 1x XLR; USB-B  
• Outputs: 1x stereo analogue RCA  
**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Hi-Fidelity Ltd.  
**TELEPHONE**  
07787 056723  
**WEBSITE**  
hifidelityuk.co.uk  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC 464

Rae's voice enters centre stage, perfectly balancing warmth and emotional frailty. The amplifier blends highly refined, sweet treble detail with a human warmth that is just captivating. In some respects it replicates many of the qualities of very high-end valve amplifiers, yet in a highly practical and flexible solid-state way.

## Conclusion

Norma Audio sometimes describes its sound quality as "unfatiguing" but this is way too modest. It paints vivid soundscapes that simply sound correct, absolutely coherent and completely unsullied. And while some high-end amps can be revealing yet desiccated and insistent, the Revo IPA-140 just sounds astonishingly lifelike and natural. I sense the company believes music is there to be enjoyed, not dissected, and this it achieves through greater musical insight and expression, an adeptness with dynamics and intimacy, effortless timing, sweet detail and a richer palette of colours and textures. Strongly recommended. **CW**

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Sweet treble; potent dynamics; highly communicative; over engineering

**DISLIKE:** DAC is USB-only

**WE SAY:** An effortless, engaging and highly expressive integrated



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## PrimaLuna Evo 200 Integrated

**AS SUPPLIED** THE Evo 200 is fitted with four EL34 valves for the output stage and a matching quartet of 12A7s for the preamp stage. It claims 2x 44W power output into 8ohm and allows you to swap the EL34 output stage valves for a variety of other alternatives.

### Sound quality

The PrimaLuna behaves in a manner that won't unsettle those embarking on their first valve amp experience. It is completely silent at idle and there aren't any thumps or pops when it's switched on or off. A 16/44.1 rip of Gary Jules' *No Poetry* is vibrant and engaging as the Evo 200 takes the accurate and spacious presentation and adds a controlled dose of richness and tonal vibrancy. Jules' vocals carry a little more emphasis than is usually the case with solid-state amps.

There's a tangible boost to the decay on guitar notes too, without any feeling of over emphasis on the midrange that comes at the expense of the frequency extremes. As there is no softening or discernible roll off to the treble or bass, the presentation feels very even and avoids the slightly bloomy sensation that can affect valve amplifiers such as this. It also means that the top end is sensational.

The bass extension is not quite as successful. The wonderfully deep and potent beat of Dead Can Dance's *Rakim* on the 24/88.2 download of *Toward The Within* has appreciable definition and control, but the Evo 200 Integrated isn't quite as hefty as some similarly priced solid-state models. How much this is going to matter to you is going to come down to the type of music you mostly listen



to, your listening room and the loudspeakers being driven. If you live for the impact of deep notes in your chest cavity, the loudspeaker that partners this integrated needs to be given careful consideration.

This is an exceptional valve amp that is easy to live with, beautifully made and possessed of the power needed to make it practical with many modern loudspeaker designs and is likely to appeal to a far wider spread of potential buyers than might initially have been expected. **ES**

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
PrimaLuna  
EvoLution 200  
Integrated Amplifier

**PRICE**  
£2,700

**TELEPHONE**  
0208 9713909

**WEBSITE**  
absolutesounds.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 457

### OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

## Rega Aethos

**THE AETHOS CLAIMS** 2x 125W power output that makes use of a quartet of 160W Sanken Darlingtons transistors. These are powerful devices and when combined with Rega's design practise of 'doubling up' the output stage so that the bias network and pre driver transistors are duplicated rather than just the output devices, it means the Aethos reaches its 125W rating without placing strain on the components.

### Sound quality

The Aethos maintains many Rega traits and is an effortlessly agile-sounding integrated. It takes a 44.1 rip of Seasick Steve's *That's All* and gets stuck into the rough and ready guitar and kickdrum with an infectious feeling of energy. The extra power hasn't come at the expense of this lightness of touch and deft handling of time signatures,

ensuring that it delivers a real feeling of effortlessness to the way it performs.

The opening title track of Orbital's *Monsters Exist* is immensely potent and free of any perceivable feeling of constraint. Much of this is down to the enormously hefty bass response as well as huge reserves of depth, detail and definition.

This ability is remarkably durable in how it holds up in the face of poorer recordings. Scratch Massive's live album *Communion* is not a reference piece of mastering, but in the hands of the Aethos the 24/44.1 download is able to convey the fury and bombast to create a convincing sense of the performers and audience as a cohesive whole. Pretty much regardless of the size and composition of the music you choose to play and how badly it was



treated in the mastering process, the Aethos has the enviable ability to turn it into something enjoyable.

Moving to vinyl, the Ray Charles and BB King cover of *Sinner's Prayer* is unfailingly accurate with a heady combination of soundstage, scale and tonal realism.

The Aethos delivers a well-crafted blend of realism, space and simple musical joy. It has the power to be usefully unaffected about the loudspeakers that it's partnered with and is a genuine pleasure regardless of the type of music that's played. This is another fine and well thought-out component from Rega, and one that makes the integrated amplifier market more competitive than ever at this price point. **ES**

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Rega Aethos

**PRICE**  
£3,000

**TELEPHONE**  
01702 333071

**WEBSITE**  
rega.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 457

### OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

# THE CLASSIC EVO

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April 2020



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## THE EVOLUTION OF A CLASSIC

The Classic Evo utilises a simple and elegant “frame” design, which bears a notable resemblance to some of the most famous turntables of the 1950’s, 60’s and 70’s. But the design is more than just aesthetically pleasing, it also combines proven hi-fi technologies with the ‘simple to set-up and own’ principles associated with Pro-Ject turntables, so you can just focus on enjoying your music.

The improved two-plinth design utilises Thermo Plastic Elastomers (TPE) to isolate the metal-finished inner-chassis, rather than the traditional method of a spring-loaded sub-chassis, but this construction effectively decouples the motor from the main bearing and the tone-arm, reducing unwanted interference between the components.



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classic tone-arm**



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moving coil cartridge**

## Rega io

**HARKING BACK TO** the days of simple, compact budget giant killers, the io sees Rega attempting to cut costs to hit a lower price without compromising performance. This means it offers a power output of 30W per channel into 8ohm plus two line-level inputs and one for MM phono. A 3.5mm headphone socket is also incorporated on the front panel.

### Sound quality

From the first bars of music it is clear that the io is something rather special at its price point. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the top end – the treble is delightful. There is no shortage of detail at all and the unit has plenty of insight to offer, but the smoothness, clarity and lack of sibilance, even in less worthy recordings, is the real prize here. Brass instruments have a pleasingly

natural rasp without ever sounding harsh while firm cymbal strikes have a crisp leading edge and a softly echoing decay.

Basslines are confident, punchy and taut and it digs deeply with confidence. The rumbling notes that mark the introduction of Mr Scruff's *Do You Hear?* are banged out with authority. Across the midband and in spatial terms, it is a confident performer, with one tiny weakness. While it certainly has the ability to generate a rock-solid central image and the depth perspective it confers on performances is highly commendable, it doesn't quite pull performers out into the room like some other designs can. On the upside, Diana Krall's vocals on *I Miss You So* are delicate with an ever so subtle echo that drives home that this is a real person in a real studio.



She just seems to be sitting further away than we're used to and located within the plane of the speaker rather than out in the room before it. This isn't a weakness of the io *per se*, but more of a character trait. It isn't difficult to get used to and, once you do, you'll find that its strengths are far easier to concentrate on.

Three inputs might seem a little miserly and its soundstage isn't the deepest in back-to-front terms, but when that's all you can think of to moan about you realise what a cracking job Rega has done. In short, the io looks, feels and sounds much more expensive than it is. **AS**

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Rega io  
**PRICE**  
£380  
**TELEPHONE**  
01702 333071  
**WEBSITE**  
rega.co.uk  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC 464

### OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

## Rotel A11 Tribute

**TUNED BY FORMER** Marantz Brand Ambassador Ken Ishiwata, the A11 Tribute is mainly designed as an analogue model, with four line-ins and a decent moving-magnet phono stage, plus switchable outputs for two sets of speakers and pre-out sockets. It also has Bluetooth aptX capability, feeding a 24-bit/192kHz Texas Instruments DAC.

### Sound quality

Playing Oleta Adams' *Get Here* it's easy to hear the shaping of the voice, the reverberation and the simple instrumentation, with the piano and bass especially vibrant. In essence, what it has is that very Ken Ishiwata thing: whatever you throw at it just sounds special, from full-orchestral music to driving rock. We have a blast playing Rory Gallagher's 1977 *Check Shirt Wizard* and the Queen/Adam Lambert *Live Around The World* set is

full of pomp and swagger, especially the recreation of the Live Aid set from the Fire Fight benefit earlier this year. There's weight, there's warmth and there's richness, but there's also air and space, and a sense that the music's being given room to breathe. That enables this integrated to draw the listener into what's being played as well as covering up any deficiencies it may have when compared with much bigger – and more expensive – rivals.

Nor do you need to limit the listening to audiophile-approved recordings: *Roadhouse Blues*, from the recently remastered *Morrison Hotel* by The Doors rockets out of the speaker with a suitably rough, dirty edge, but with great character to the performances. And it isn't fazed by the demands of big orchestral/choral



works, as we discover playing the dramatic recent Alpha recording of Haydn's *The Creation*, packed as it is with information. Even with the outburst of "Let there be light" at the opening, there is no sense that it is hardening up or losing its focus in any way. Yes, some may suggest that 'only' 50W per channel isn't really enough, but the ability of the A11 Tribute to keep it clean even when pushing hard comfortably belies that view.

If you're in the market for an affordable amplifier with more than a sniff of star quality, this one comes firmly recommended – it really is rather special and puts up very strong competition for the established favourites in the entry-level sector. **AE**

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Rotel A11 Tribute  
**PRICE**  
£500  
**TELEPHONE**  
01903 221710  
**WEBSITE**  
rotel.com  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC 469

### OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

ribbon tweeter

134mm  
bass/mid  
drive unit



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134mm



# Yamaha A-S3200

**U**nlike so many of its price rivals, the A-S3200 is totally devoid of streaming or even DAC functionality. This is an unapologetically old-school integrated, complete with MM/MC phono input and headphone out.

Yamaha claims a punchy 100W RMS per channel into 8ohm and 150W into 4, for this Class AB design – which is more than most people will ever need. The power comes not via discrete transistors, but by MOSFET power modules. Interestingly, the phono preamplifier does use discrete transistors, and is very neatly laid out in a separate circuit board using good-quality components.

## Sound quality

Standout facets are a crisp, detailed and precise midband along with effortless and authoritative power delivery. Feed it some punchy eighties pop from Duran Duran, and *Last Chance On The Stairway* comes over in a commanding way. Though not something you'd immediately classify as audiophile, this is still a well recorded track. There's a lot going on, including a gutsy bassline and an energetic midband. Even at highish levels, driving big Yamaha NS-1000M loudspeakers, this amp doesn't flinch; its bottom end is powerful and expressive, and never shows any sign of running out of puff even at high volumes on crescendos.

Although the A-S3200 never sounds edgy or volatile, its clean and forensic midband is subtly tonally 'well lit'. Heavily modulated nineties electronic dance proves more palatable than expected; Nookie's *The Sound Of Music* doesn't assault our sensitive earholes anywhere near as much as some amps we've heard, the sound presented with grip, bite and flare-flapping bass.

Another key attribute is the expansive soundstaging; it's able to recreate a cathedral-like recorded acoustic, if that's what was originally committed to tape in the studio. Large scale classic rock such as *Los Endos* by Genesis really fills the room. The soundstage pushes very wide left to right, and is decently three dimensional too. Better than many, the A-S3200 is able to set up a big sound. We are struck by the size and width of Phil Collins' drum kit, with epic pan rolls that punch through the complex mix. Steve Hackett's legendary guitar noodling is also a joy, sounding vital and alive.

Rhythmically the Yamaha is a battler. It doesn't quite have the fluidity and lyricism of some similarly priced tube amps, but still makes music engaging and lively. This is achieved in two ways; firstly its midband has formidable transient speed, with a great rhythmic snap to the proceedings. Secondly, the bass is big and solid, but importantly has

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Yamaha A-S3200

**PRICE**  
£5,000

**ORIGIN**  
Japan/Malaysia

**TYPE**  
Integrated amplifier

**WEIGHT**  
24.7kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
435 x 180 x 464mm

**FEATURES**  
• Claimed power: 2x 100W RMS (8ohm)  
• Switchable MM/MC phono stage  
• Inputs: 2x XLR; 4x RCA; 1x power amp  
• Outputs: 2x record; preamp; 6.35mm headphone jack

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Yamaha Electronics UK Ltd.

**TELEPHONE**  
0344 8111116

**WEBSITE**  
uk.yamaha.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 464

next to no overhang. There's none of that spongy sensation that gives a pleasant bloom to proceedings, yet which slurs one note into the next. For these reasons, we find subtle pop songs like The Dolphin Brothers' *Catch The Fall* sound surprisingly infectious through this bruiser. This big integrated amplifier is fast, detailed and lithe enough to make even relatively intricate music sound like it has a *raison d'être*.

## Conclusion

This accomplished performer succeeds through its breadth and depth of ability, rather than exceeding in one particular area. It's a highly capable all-rounder, and many will love its snappy sound and gutsy demeanour. The only downside is its presentation lacks the more gentle, fluid character of some similarly priced valve amps and solid-state designs. As ever, this comes down to taste – so prospective purchasers should audition it. Factor in its superb build, neat styling and overall air of quality, and it's seriously impressive. Although expensive, it represents great value for money. **DP**

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**

★★★★★

**VALUE FOR MONEY**

★★★★★

**BUILD QUALITY**

★★★★★

**FEATURES**

★★★★★

**OVERALL**

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Speed; grip; detail; power; versatility

**DISLIKE:** Nothing at the price

**WESAY:** Super stylish, highly capable monster integrated

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Issue No. 471

Yearbook 2020

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# Primare

## I25 Prisma

**I**n its base form, Primare's I25 integrated (HFC 459) is a straightforward 100W design furnished with the company's second-generation UFPD 2 Class D amplifier modules. There are five line-level RCA inputs and two outputs. The I25 thus specified is an analogue integrated amp pure and simple, clean and understated in design and very nicely put together.

But it has also been designed to be modular, with room for two upgrade components either pre-installed at the factory or retro fitted as and when. The first is the DM35 DAC module, which links up to the rear panel's USB and S/PDIF sockets (two coaxial and four optical) and uses the AKM AK4497 chip enabling up to 32-bit/768kHz PCM and DSD256 conversion. The DAC module must be in place before the second (SM35) module can join it. It's the one that gives the I25 we're looking at here its extra moniker: Prisma.

Prisma is Primare's digital streaming platform, providing multi-room/multi-zone connectivity and control for playback of stored and streamed media, wired or wireless, all managed from any mobile device through a dedicated system control app. In addition to Bluetooth, AirPlay, and Spotify Connect, Prisma's Google Chromecast core in conjunction with Google Home allows direct connection to hundreds of streaming applications.

### Sound quality

Some amps sound great and have fine powers of resolution and separation but show a tendency to homogenise, making contrasts – both bold and subtle – seem more similar than they should. The I25's sound, conversely, cleaves towards a valued high-end ability to discriminate with meticulous care, not just in broad strokes but also in the finest detail. James Taylor's *American Standard* sounds more involving and emotionally invested than you'd credit, simple as that.

Clarity, speed, grip, strong dynamics, neutral tonality – the Primare has it all. Irrespective of source, it combines impeccable timing with tight focus and a firm grasp of microdynamics, which does wonders for its ability to resolve nuance and inflection. It offers strong in-room presence where performers and instruments are portrayed with dimensionality and body in a truly spacious soundstage.

*Shake Dance* from The Crusaders has relentlessly funky groove, but the recording, while crisp and clean, is woefully dry, thin and bleached out – surprisingly so for a GRP production. There's only so much the I25 can do to ameliorate this and it doesn't inject as much warmth as a classic tube amp will, but still manages to deliver a plausibly fleshed-out presentation with a still greater sense of drive and depth.

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Primare I25 Prisma  
**PRICE**  
£3,200  
**ORIGIN**  
Sweden/China  
**TYPE**  
Integrated amplifier/  
DAC/streamer  
**WEIGHT**  
11kg  
**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
430 x 106 x 420mm  
**FEATURES**  
• Quoted power  
output: 2x 100W  
(8ohm)  
• Digital inputs: 2x  
coaxial; 4x optical;  
1x USB-A; 1x USB-B  
• Digital output:  
1x coaxial  
• Analogue inputs:  
5x unbalanced RCA  
**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Karma AV  
**TELEPHONE**  
01423 358846  
**WEBSITE**  
primare.net  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC 461

A modern and heavily pumped electro-swing production such as Caravan Palace's *Leena* from the album *Chronologic* is right up the Primare's street, the amp exhibiting the kind of verve, slam and fulsome yet agile bass the track demands. It also renders the album's more reflective moments in exquisite detail. There's no mush or muddle here, no hype or hurry – just balance, control and clarity. If you like a sound that's fast, open, clean, clear, dynamically expressive and devoid of manipulative emphasis, the I25 Prisma ticks all the boxes.

### Conclusion

Perhaps the OLED display could be a little larger. The tonal balance isn't artificially warmed up, so it's unlikely to appeal to tube aficionados. Maybe the app, while logically structured and impressively comprehensive, could be a bit slicker. But that's about it as far as imperfections go. Analogue and digital in graceful harmony? That perfectly sums up the Primare I25 Prisma. Enthusiastically recommended. **DV**

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

##### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

##### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

##### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

##### FEATURES

★★★★★

##### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Superb sound quality; fine DAC; extensive streaming spec; design and build

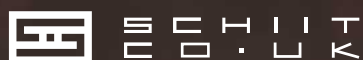
**DISLIKE:** Small display

**WE SAY:** Something of a wonder box that marries the best of analogue and digital

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## CADENZA

The Cadenza Series of high-end Moving Coil (MC) cartridges allow you to get the most from your vinyl records. By carefully implementing cobalt-iron pole pieces, using new improved winding processes on the armature, and employing an extruded aluminium housing - amongst other changes - the Cadenza Series is able to out-perform all those that came before it.

The name *Cadenza* comes from the Italian word for cadence, which refers to a soloist during an orchestra performance where they play alone in an elaborate manner. It therefore seemed fitting that such a capable and nuanced cartridge series should use the same name.

Like other modern ranges, the Cadenza Series is structured in Ortofon's preferred colour-tier nomenclature; so there are Red, Blue, Bronze, and Black variants available to suit varying budgets and tastes.



### Red

This MC cartridge and introduction to the series features a Nude Fine Line stylus which delivers open, dynamic sound with a touch of warmth.



### Blue

Featuring much greater dynamics and resolution, the sound is more open and reproduces more accurate details thanks to the Nude FG 70 stylus.



### Bronze

A step up in the range, this cartridge boasts a Replicant 100 stylus to produce stereo imaging capabilities that illuminate the farthest corners of the soundstage.



### Black

Flagship of the range, the Cadenza Black is simply the best and features a Nude Shibata stylus which guarantees amazing tonal neutrality, dynamics and purity of sound.



# Quad Vena II Play

**Q**uad clearly felt there was room for improvement on the original Vena II (HFC 448) and so has augmented it with a full suite of network music streaming functionality provided by DTS Play-Fi for an additional £150.

This changes the Vena II into a smart integrated amplifier. Quad's parent company IAG is committed to the DTS streaming platform, which delivers the ability to network with other Play-Fi products, regardless of who they are manufactured by.

The only physical differences between the Vena II Play and the 'basic' version is that the new model loses an optical input while the digital outputs have been removed. You still get single coaxial, optical and USB ins making use of an ESS ES9018K2M DAC, while analogue connectivity runs to a pair of RCA line inputs and a moving-magnet phono stage. There's also a 6.35mm headphone socket and RCA preamp output.

## Sound quality

From the first few bars of Jack Savoretti's *Between The Minds*, the Quad shows that the addition of the streaming section has not affected the virtues of the integrated's music performance. The bass extension is impressive, producing a muscular and beautifully controlled low end. The sweeping *Black Rain* proves to be propulsive and very compelling,

possessed of the scale it needs to be truly convincing.

It can take material like Jarvis Cocker's world-weary vocal in Air's *One Hell Of A Party* streamed from Qobuz and effortlessly find the emotional connection within. The manner in which the ESS DAC is implemented sees it deliver superb detail retrieval and a wonderful sense of soundstage space plus a sense of warmth and tonal sweetness that adds a human quality to the sound. It's usefully forgiving of compressed streams too and manages to make internet radio sound pretty appealing provided that you don't drop the bit-rate too far.

Crucially, DTS Play-Fi feels good enough as an interface to make you want to explore the Quad's performance and can comfortably hold its own via the spread of available streaming services. In a perfect world, the inclusion of AirPlay or Chromecast would be a welcome final addition, but the Bluetooth connection is good enough to handle most of these requirements.

Unsurprisingly, the Vena II Play's performance elsewhere is pretty much indistinguishable from the standard version. I cannot think of many playback source combinations that will exhaust the connectivity on offer here, and the Play should be able to accommodate a fair degree of 'stretch' with sources purchased

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Quad Vena II Play

**PRICE**  
£800

**ORIGIN**  
UK/China

**TYPE**  
Integrated amplifier/  
DAC/streamer

**WEIGHT**  
6.1kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
313 x 94 x 302mm

## FEATURES

- Quoted power output: 2x 45W (8ohm)
- 32-bit/384kHz and DSD256-capable DAC
- Digital inputs: 1x optical; 1x coaxial; 1x USB-B; 1x Ethernet; aptX Bluetooth; wi-fi
- Analogue inputs: 2x RCAs; 1x MM phono stage

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
IAG Ltd.

**TELEPHONE**  
01480 452561

**WEBSITE**  
quad-hifi.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 457

further down the line. The built-in headphone amplifier is particularly accomplished and delivers an excellent listening experience with Audio-Technica's ATH-A2000Z headphone (HFC 412). By contrast, the moving-magnet phono stage has to content itself with being pretty good rather than truly great, but I'd still say that it's more than up to the job of giving life to turntables in the £300 to £500 price range.

## Conclusion

The Vena II Play successfully blurs the boundary between integrated amps and all-in-one systems to the point where people looking for either could happily buy it and be delighted with their purchase. In its compact and charmingly nostalgic chassis it packs enough connectivity and performance to ensure that very few devices at a similar price can match it. Crucially, the improvements that have been made to the DTS Play-Fi streaming platform are enough to ensure that Quad's outstanding integrated baby has gone and got even better with greater flexibility to boot. **ES**

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Excellent sound quality; range of features; styling

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

**DISLIKE:** No AirPlay or Chromecast

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

**WESAY:** A superb feature boost to the existing Vena II that turns it into a very competent all-in-one music system

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★



## Auralic Aries G2.1

**D**esigned to sit at the heart of a complex digital music system, the Aries G2.1 is able to play music from local storage, over a network or on a connected USB store or online streaming services. But it goes further than that: for a £400 premium over the £4,200 price-tag, it can be supplied with 2TB of internal storage, enabling it either to play music stored within or serve that content to external devices. And thanks to the new Lightning OS7.0 on which the unit runs, you can also use it as a CD ripper: connect a USB CD drive and copy the contents of your discs to its internal library, with a multi-read/memory system to ensure an accurate rip. What's more, you can use the drive to listen to a CD while ripping, or simply play the disc in a conventional manner.

The Aries G2.1 will need to be used with a DAC, or feed another network device, in order for music to be heard: there are no analogue outputs, but digital options including optical and electrical digital – the latter with both coaxial and balanced AES/EBU connections – and a galvanically isolated USB for a compatible DAC. In addition, there's Auralic's Lightning Link connection, to feed other devices from the company. This is via an entirely proprietary data-transfer system, which is carried over from the previous G2/GX generation.

The DAC USB port software has been updated to work with a wider range of external converters, and the HDD port given a boost to give it enough juice to power more external drives. The G2.1 is also Roon-ready, so you can play through it that way if you are so inclined.

### Sound quality

The major question concerns how the Aries G2.1 sounds, and the answer is it doesn't: rather it's about delivering the cleanest possible signal to the DAC with which it's used, so if you're in the 'USB is USB and that's it' camp, you probably won't believe it can make any difference. However, while the ultimate sound quality is more likely to be affected in a major way by the DAC on the other end of the USB cable, experimentation with a range of USB options fed from the Auralic and a selection of computers, both Windows and Mac, shows that the Aries G2.1 has a more ordered, crisp and clean sound (maybe as much to do with a lack of electrical noise on the USB connection as anything else).

That there are differences is apparent even with very modest digital hardware connected, the budget iFi Audio Zen DAC revealing the greater grip and tighter bass it can deliver when fed from the Auralic, and moving up the DAC scale – including using the digital inputs of my Naim ND555 via the Muteck

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Auralic Aries G2.1  
**PRICE**  
£4,200  
**ORIGIN**  
China  
**TYPE**  
Network transport  
**WEIGHT**  
9.3kg  
**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
340 x 96 x 320mm  
**FEATURES**  
• File formats to 32-bit/384kHz and DSD256  
• Outputs: USB; Lightning Link; optical; coaxial; AES/EBU  
• Roon and MQA compatibility; wi-fi/wired networking  
**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Auralic Europe  
**TELEPHONE**  
07590106105  
**WEBSITE**  
auralic.com  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC 469

MC-3+ Smart Clock USB interface, for a real 'belt and braces' reclocking approach – shows the same effects. Especially illuminating is using the Aries G2.1 into the USB input of the Marantz SACD 30n (see p107), thus giving the opportunity to compare the two streaming platforms. In this context the Auralic proves remarkably effective: the Marantz is very good indeed, but the digital feed finds the system unearthing previously unheard detail and giving an even more resolved soundstage, with performers more tightly focused.

### Conclusion

It would be tempting to view the Aries G2.1 as being of greatest relevance when used in an all-Auralic digital system, perhaps connected to the Vega G2.1 DAC via the Lightning Link (although, of course, the Vega has its own streaming capability built-in). But this Wireless Streaming Transporter goes further than that – combine it with a high-quality DAC, and you will have a digital front end as appealing for its performance as it is enjoyable to operate. **AE**

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★  
**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★  
**BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★  
**FEATURES**  
★★★★★  
**OVERALL**  
★★★★★

**LIKE:** Streaming implementation; makes the most of any DAC  
**DISLIKE:** User interface on unit could be clearer  
**WE SAY:** A very well-sorted digital transport: it's not cheap, but its capabilities are entirely compelling



# Melco

## N100 EX

**B**uilding a reputation as one of the go-to brands for audiophile music servers, Melco Syncrets – the company behind the ‘Music Library’ series – was founded as part of Melco Holdings, the parent of storage manufacturer, Buffalo. That heritage means the brand started off with a distinct advantage: it could make – and optimise for audio use – its own hard drives, rather than having to work with third-party components originally built for general data use.

Audio storage tends to be a case of write once, read many times, and Melco majors on isolating its drives, both electrically and physically, using its HS-S<sup>2</sup> (Highly Stable Storage System). And yes, it still uses hard drives. Not the solid-state drives some other brands champion, because it believes its 2.5in HDDs sound best.

The N100 EX, the most affordable Melco ‘Digital Music Library’, shares

the styling of one half of the company’s two-box flagship N10, and comes with 2TB of storage, but – unlike the Naim and Novafidelity overleaf – has no internal optical drive for disc ripping. Instead you can transfer music to it over a network, using USB storage or simply plug in a USB disc drive to do the job. It also has a dedicated isolated USB socket to connect it to a DAC.

Also isolated, for less interference, is one of the two Ethernet sockets here, the idea being you connect it directly to your network player (if you’re using one), and use the other for network connection control, internet radio and so on.

Melco has its own Music HD app (only available for iPad) to control the N100 EX and this can also make use of the new models’ incorporation of Song Kong and MinimServer to provide intelligent music browsing, with advanced tagging relevant to

various genres of music. It also allows the N100 EX to access internet radio, Qobuz and Tidal.

### Performance

The N100 EX is tested with a variety of offboard DACs and digital-input amps: everything from AudioQuest’s DragonFly Cobalt (see p100), through Chord’s Mojo up to a very high-end Balanced Audio Technology unit we just happen to have hanging around (as you do...). It’s hard not to conclude it sounds very good as a digital source, even if the ultimate sound is going to be characterised by the DAC you use with it.

### Conclusion

Even with the DragonFly, the sound has scale, power and depth, with excellent space and air at the top end – as is clear with The Tallis Scholars’ *Allegri Miserere*. Meanwhile, with more exotic DACs the sense of control, detail and presence is thrilling. Throw in the ease of use of the N100 XD under the control of the Music HD app and its clever tagging, and we’re completely sold. **AE**

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Melco N100 EX

**PRICE**  
£2,000

**ORIGIN**  
Japan

**TYPE**  
Digital music server

**WEIGHT**  
3kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
215 x 61 x 269mm

**FEATURES**  
• Input: USB-A;  
Ethernet  
• Outputs: Ethernet;  
USB-A

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Audiophile Digital  
Music Masters Ltd.

**TELEPHONE**  
01252 784525

**WEBSITE**  
melco-audio.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 462



### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Clean lines; solid build; Intelligent Music Library software

**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** No disc ripping as standard; fixed storage capacity

**BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **WESAY:** Heavy optimisation of both drives and connections pays off in the crisp, clean sound

**FEATURES**  
★★★★★

#### OVERALL





# Naim Uniti Core

**I**t's tempting to see the Uniti Core as little more than a refreshed version of the original UnitiServe, which first saw the light of day a decade ago. At first glance they seem to do the same thing – ripping discs to internal storage, then serving them up to the likes of the Uniti, ND- and Mu-so models over a home network.

However, to see the Uniti Core as no more than a server in 'new Uniti' clothing is to sell it short: sure, it comes in casework to match the Uniti Atom, Star (HFC 433) and Nova, complete with an acrylic plinth, but there's rather more going on here than just a cosmetic refresh.

The Uniti Core is sold 'bare bones': in other words, it comes without a hard drive, allowing the user to select their own internal drive – although it can also be used without a drive, with either a USB option connected or feeding a separate NAS drive.

Fitting a drive is a simple matter, although I'm sure a retailer will do it for you: Naim recommends Seagate 3.5in HDDs or Samsung 2.5in SSDs.

Naim's preferred choice appears to be an SSD, although the HDD is hardly noisy – being inaudible in all but a silent room. The SSD is obviously quieter, as well as giving the user that 'no moving parts' reassurance. We can't hear any differences in sound quality between the two.

As well as the ability to serve music simultaneously in up to 32-bit/384kHz to up to a dozen network players, the Core can also be used as a direct player via its USB output to a DAC.

Unfortunately, at the time of writing there isn't a suitable USB DAC in the Naim range, but there's no shortage of alternatives out there. We also experience good results when feeding the Core via a Mutech MC-3+ Smart Clock USB interface into the digital inputs on the NDS555/555PS, as

well as connecting its BNC digital output to the same input on the network player.

## Performance

Control of the Uniti Core, as with Naim's other network products, is via the company's app, which is well sorted for iOS – as you might hope, given that at the time of writing it is in version 5.15.5 – but slightly less smooth in Android form. The Core lacks the online services found in some rivals, but makes it easy to find artists, album, tracks and so on, and the sound when connected to a high-quality DAC has many of the qualities of the Melco overleaf in its confidence, weight and definition.

## Conclusion

Comparing playback on the Core with using a Mac mini as the source – what we'd expect many to be using – there is an improvement in clarity with albums such as Tony Allen and Hugh Masekela's *Rejoice*, really bringing out the focus and spirit of the tracks, attributes which also serve Rory Gallagher's live set well. **AE**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Naim Uniti Core

**PRICE**  
£2,000

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**TYPE**  
CD ripper/store

**WEIGHT**  
7kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
214 x 95 x 265mm

**FEATURES**  
• Inputs: CD ripper;  
2x USB-A; Ethernet  
• Outputs:  
BNC coaxial

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Naim Audio Ltd.

**TELEPHONE**  
01722 426600

**WEBSITE**  
naimaudio.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 462



## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Ease of ripping; ability to serve multiple network players

**DISLIKE:** Storage is extra; you need the app to use it

**WE SAY:** It may be simple in its design and function, but its performance is quite exceptional

[illegible]



# Pro-Ject Stream Box S2 Ultra

**E**verything the Novafidelity overleaf is, the Stream Box S2 Ultra isn't. You may find yourself asking how Pro-Ject justifies the modest price of this unit, given that inside is basically a Raspberry Pi mini-computer board (the quad-core CM3 version) running open-source Volumio software, all wrapped in the same case of many of Pro-Ject's Box Design components.

The company has instead spent its budget on optimising and improving the basic platform, by employing the services of renowned digital designer John Westlake.

Westlake explains that, having set the parameters for the streaming design here – bit-perfect, DSD capability and the ability to use the connected DAC as the master clock – he went back and worked with Volumio to create a custom version of the software to work on the chosen

platform. Then he addressed any weaknesses (in audio terms) of the Raspberry Pi, notably clocking, power supply regulation and 'detoxing' the USB connections to remove noise and jitter. What we have here, then, is a little box able to take digital datastreams over an Ethernet connection or play music stored on USB devices, and then output to a suitable DAC via USB. It is controlled using a web browser on any device on the same network; via Pro-Ject's Play app for Android; using a Bluetooth keyboard and mouse, with a screen connected to the S2 Ultra's HDMI port; or Roon.

It will play Spotify and Tidal – the latter with MQA pass-through to a suitable DAC – as well as handling PCM files up to 24-bit/384kHz and DSD256, subject to the DAC you use it with. Additionally, as a neat trick the USB input can be used when the S2

Ultra is between a PC and DAC, allowing that path to be 'detoxed', too.

## Performance

This may be simple-looking with just two controls (a power button and another to switch between USB and PC bypass), but it's highly sophisticated and heavily optimised for audio quality. And that's readily apparent in use, whether streaming music from network sources or playing from USB storage. Dispel any thoughts that a product has to be big to deliver a full-scale sound: the Pro-Ject pairs with a good DAC to sound powerful, gutsy and beautifully refined, with everything from large-scale orchestral works to the most intimate of singer-songwriter tracks.

## Conclusion

It's sharply focused, generously weighted and capable of an open, fast sound that drips with detail while majoring on musical flow. You may have to rearrange your thinking a bit to accept so much sound can come from something so small, but you won't be disappointed. **AE**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Pro-Ject Stream Box S2 Ultra  
**PRICE**  
£600  
**ORIGIN**  
Austria  
**TYPE**  
USB/Ethernet Bridge  
**WEIGHT**  
375g  
**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
105 x 37 x 105mm  
**FEATURES**  
• Inputs: USB-A; Ethernet  
• Output: USB-A; HDMI  
**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Henley Audio Ltd.  
**TELEPHONE**  
01235 511166  
**WEBSITE**  
henleyaudio.co.uk  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC 462



## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY



**LIKE:** Simplicity; integrity of audio engineering; price

#### VALUE FOR MONEY



**DISLIKE:** No storage as standard; some will find it hard to fathom

#### BUILD QUALITY



**WE SAY:** A slick little unit, it might look tiny but it's capable of delivering great sound

#### FEATURES



#### OVERALL





# TONEARM CABLE +

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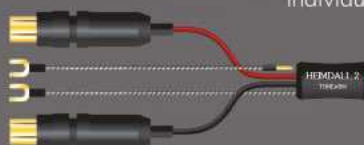
TYR 2

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Individually shielded twisted pairs, wrapped in an additional layer of braided shielding.



NORDOST

Distributed in the UK and Ireland by  Renaissance

0131 555 3922

[info@renaissanceaudio.co.uk](mailto:info@renaissanceaudio.co.uk)

[www.nordost.com](http://www.nordost.com)

Made in USA 



# AudioQuest DragonFly Cobalt

**A**s the latest addition to the DragonFly family, the Cobalt is designed to augment the existing Black and Red versions (HFC 414). And it must be said, it is a bit of a head scratcher at first as there appears to be no difference between it and the Black, which is £180 cheaper. Plus the maximum sample rate supported is a relatively low 24-bit/96kHz, although native MQA decoding is supported.

Where the Cobalt differs, however, is internally. It is still built around an ESS Sabre DAC, but the higher spec ES9038Q2M is used with an ESS 9601 volume controller. There's also a new filter arrangement that uses a minimum phase, slow roll-off filter claimed to make it more satisfying to listen to long term. These refinements are partnered with a range of measures to reduce its susceptibility to noise and interference.

The Cobalt uses sufficiently little power that it can be connected to a mobile phone or tablet via a relevant

adapter. A male USB-A connection is fitted at one end and AudioQuest supplies a USB-C adapter in the box. This outputs to a 3.5mm stereo output. Volume is adjusted on the connecting device, and the sole indicator is the DragonFly logo that lights and changes colour to indicate different sample rates.

## Sound Quality

There is a method in the madness as to why the maximum sample rate of 96kHz has been selected. Doing so means that it doesn't require any USB driver so you can use it on any computer. As so many rivals lack any form of driverless operation at all, this is a significant plus point for the AudioQuest.

Listening to the Cobalt attached directly to a Roon Nucleus+ (HFC 439) shows that the new decoding and filter arrangements offer significant advantages over the Red. Listening to the entirely instrumental *Black Swans And Wormhole Wizards* by Joe

Satriani, reveals subtle details and microdynamics in Satriani's playing that elude the DragonFly Red. There is a spaciousness and order to the music that the more affordable DAC cannot achieve as reliably.

While I would hesitate to describe either the Black or the Red as fatiguing, there is a more natural feeling to the way the Cobalt handles the unplugged version of Emily King's *Can't Hold Me* that makes it easier and more enjoyable to listen to for extended periods. It manages to do this without any subjective loss of dynamics or punch and it is a very elegant balancing act.

It is as a mobile DAC that the Cobalt really shines, though. For Tidal users in particular, the combination of its small size, MQA support and ability to drive any earphone (and indeed most headphones) far beyond any sane listening level means you can enjoy its excellent performance while maintaining an easily portable set of components. AudioQuest's efforts at resisting noise levels have also been extremely successful. The simple act of using a male USB connection also pays dividends because it allows the Cobalt to attach directly and avoid having an extra run of cabling acting like an aerial for interference. In the time it is on test, I barely hear a moment's cellular noise and this is vital in ensuring you are drawn into the music itself rather than being constantly distracted.

## Conclusion

The DragonFly Cobalt might at first appear to be an odd addition to the range on paper, and if you need support for very hi-res PCM and DSD you will need to look elsewhere. In more real-world terms, though, this is a fantastic DAC that elevates the go-anywhere, work-anywhere abilities that the more affordable models do so well, providing an extra level of performance. **ES**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
AudioQuest  
DragonFly Cobalt

**PRICE**  
£270

**ORIGIN**  
US/China

**TYPE**  
Portable DAC

**WEIGHT**  
22g

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
19 x 12 x 62mm

**FEATURES**  
• Supports sample rates up to: 24-bit/96kHz PCM  
• MQA compatible  
• Roon compatible

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
AudioQuest

**WEBSITE**  
audioquest.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 462

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Open, rich and detailed sound; well made and easy to use

**DISLIKE:** Limits to format handling and connectivity

**WE SAY:** The Cobalt is the best DragonFly yet and one of the best portable decoding options out there



# Chord Electronics Hugo TT2

**E**ven in the spirit of stoking up some tension, it would be unwise to suggest that the Hugo TT2 DAC/headphone amp – minus Chord’s partnering performance-enhancing, million-tap M-Scaler – is deprived of tools to put the frighteners on its rivals in a congested marketplace. When it comes to its upscaling and processing power, this is a Bugatti Chiron in a field of Golf GTIs.

Compared with the 256-tap filters most traditional DAC chips run, the Hugo TT2 employs a Xilinx Artix 7 Field Programmable Gate Array

## Other DACs sound softer and more impressionistic in direct comparison

(FPGA), custom-coded by Rob Watts, with 86x 208MHz cores running in parallel to create an advanced 16FS Watts Time Aligned (WTA) filter with 98,304-taps, double that of the Hugo 2.

A new high-power discreet output stage coupled with second-order noise-shaping integrated between the DAC output and filter is said to further reduce already vanishingly low distortion while, in place of the original TT’s Li-Po battery power supply are six

super capacitors capable of delivering huge, linear dynamic currents with peak output of 5A, 9.3V RMS.

At the price, premium build is a given and hardly a stretch for Chord, which takes pride in its aviation standard build, though the use of small steel ball bearings for buttons, coloured illuminations under glass port holes and a polychromatic sphere remain as quirky as ever, even though these are now supplemented with a more conventional scrolling menu system viewed through a small display window on the front left corner.

The Hugo TT2 can handle up to 32-bit/768kHz PCM and DSD512 and has four filter options ranging from incisive-neutral to subtly warmed up. Neatly organised on the back are a USB socket, two optical inputs, two coaxials (using BNC connectors) and both single-ended and balanced XLR outputs. Although network streaming isn’t on board, aptX Bluetooth is for streaming from a mobile or tablet.

## Sound quality

We could talk about dynamic range and noise floor modulation, but the bottom line is the Hugo TT2 simply creates a more believable illusion of a physical presence and space than any of its rivals. Some get hold of a recording and ask: “How can I help you?” while the Chord grabs it by

the lapels, let’s say BB King’s *Live At The Apollo*, fixes its stare and asks: “What have you got?”

Potency swells dynamically from within and doesn’t apply just to the musicians on stage. At the Apollo, the audience is a palpable, perfectly located presence, too. The soundstage is expansive but more remarkable is that the clarity of imaging, solid and ambient, extends right out to the edges. Other DACs sound softer and more impressionistic in comparison.

Then there’s the Hugo TT2’s ability to adapt. For example, the opening wash of strings on Randy Newman’s *Brothers* is composed of individual violins and cellos playing as a collective, not a rosy amorphous mass. The start of notes, their harmonic body, the long tail of decay, the ambient acoustic – it’s all so easy to hear. Meanwhile, *Core Shift* from Yello clearly channels *The Race*, but no other DAC plays it with the pace, precision and verve of the Chord.

## Conclusion

It isn’t just the pace, precision and passion that impresses, it’s also the grasp of performance and punctuality. Quite simply, the TT2 mixes fire and finesse like nothing else. **DV**

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Chord Electronics  
Hugo TT2

**PRICE**  
£3,400

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**TYPE**  
DSD-capable DAC/  
preamplifier/  
headphone amp

**WEIGHT**  
2.5kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
235 x 52 x 238mm

**FEATURES**  
● Supports sample rates up to: 32-bit/768kHz PCM and DSD512  
● Digital inputs: 2x coaxial (BNC); 2x optical; 1x USB  
● Analogue outputs: balanced XLR; single-ended RCA; 2x 6.35mm and 1x 3.5mm headphone

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Chord Electronics Ltd.

**TELEPHONE**  
01622 721444

**WEBSITE**  
chordelectronics.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 468

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Stunning sound quality; size; build; M-Scaler upgradeability

**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Quirky ergonomics might split opinions

**BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **WESAY:** A DAC that believes in the superiority of digital and shows why

**FEATURES**  
★★★★★

### OVERALL





# iFi Audio Zen Blue

**A**s one of the latest additions to iFi's digital-to-analogue converter range, the Zen Blue is a dedicated

Bluetooth DAC. With no other input connectivity, it initially looks a little parsimonious but there is a matching Zen DAC also priced at £130 to cover USB connectivity needs.

Built around a Qualcomm 5100 series chip running a Bluetooth 5.0 implementation, the Zen Blue is considerably more energy efficient than older Bluetooth versions. Codec support includes SBC, Apple devices can use AAC, Android users get aptX and aptX HD and there's LDAC and HWA; pair a device with the Zen Blue and it will work out the best connection standard available to it and stream at the highest quality.

Meanwhile an ESS Sabre chipset ensures that jitter – an unavoidable part of Bluetooth connectivity – is controlled before decoding takes place. This outputs via a stage employing custom op amps that the company uses in its more expensive products to a choice of stereo RCAs or a balanced 4.4mm jack plug connection. Alternatively, you can flick a switch on the back and turn the Zen Blue into a transport that can be connected via optical or coaxial to any DAC that takes your fancy.

A neat touch is the use of the iFi logo to denote the Bluetooth standard that's connected and tells you at a

glance what the DAC is doing. It works very well and keeps the aesthetics nice and simple.

## Sound quality

We start testing via its RCA stereo line output. AAC is decisively better than the standard SBC codec, but still effectively equivalent to 320kbps MP3. This is reflected in the performance on offer. *End Theme* by Zero 7 sounds sweet and tonally convincing, but lacks the weight and richness to the strings that a lossless version delivers.

Switching to aptX the jump in three dimensionality, scale and tonal richness is immediately noticeable. This is the point that Bluetooth steps beyond simple convenience and becomes something more significant. Again, it's right at the pointy end of what you can expect from an aptX source and although the ESS DAC's presentation is extremely detailed, it's not the sweetest sound.

Playing a 44.1kHz rip of Air's *Alone In Kyoto*, there is an effortlessness to the presentation that is not something we've experienced before with Bluetooth, even with more expensive DACs that support aptX codecs and the perception is performance that's indistinguishable from connecting to a USB DAC and playing the file directly.

The final party piece is being able to switch the iFi Audio over to 'transport' mode and listening to it via another DAC. This may not be an obvious

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
iFi Audio Zen Blue

**PRICE**  
£130

**ORIGIN**  
UK/China

**TYPE**  
Bluetooth DAC

**WEIGHT**  
476g

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
100 x 35 x 158mm

**FEATURES**  
• Codec support:  
SBC; AAC; aptX;  
aptX HD; LDAC; HWA  
• Digital outputs: 1x  
coaxial; 1x optical  
• Analogue outputs:  
1x RCA stereo;  
4.4mm balanced jack

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Armour Home  
Electronics

**TELEPHONE**  
01279 501111

**WEBSITE**  
ifi-audio.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 460

application for the Zen Blue, but the underlying qualities of it as a piece of Bluetooth hardware do throw the sound into sharp relief.

No matter what we chuck at it, the connection is unconditionally stable and completely free from background noise or interference. This might sound fairly obvious, but it hasn't always been our experience even with costlier Bluetooth rivals.

## Conclusion

The fact that iFi Audio has tied reliability, flexibility and performance together in a single package is very impressive. That it's also done all of this for £130 is nothing short of outstanding. Feed it the right Bluetooth source (aptX or better) and the Zen Blue takes what many still regard as nothing more than a convenience feature and delivers something that genuinely approaches hi-fi sound. The scope for it to be bolted to even better quality DACs is just the icing on the cake, making it not only a genuine bargain but quite possibly the best Bluetooth device we've ever encountered. **JP**

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Exceptional performance; build quality; price

**DISLIKE:** Quirky looks

**WE SAY:** A brilliant Bluetooth DAC that delivers outstanding performance at a bargain price

# Black Rhodium SUPERCHARGED 'S' RANGE

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- A cost effective upgrade for mid range Hi-Fi systems.



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# Mytek Brooklyn Bridge

**M**ytek's original Brooklyn DAC/preamplifier first impressed us back in *HFC* 416, before the Brooklyn DAC+ follow-up in *HFC* 449. The Brooklyn Bridge takes the Brooklyn DAC+ and swaps out the AES/EBU digital input in favour of USB-A port for an external hard drive and Ethernet input along with a wi-fi antenna. While the same Sabre ES9028PRO 32-bit DAC is still employed (enabling sample rates up to 384kHz and DSD256), a new network card transforms the DAC into a network-capable music playing solution. Supported services include Tidal, Qobuz, Spotify and Deezer, it can stream directly from a UPnP server/NAS drive, Dropbox, Microsoft OneDrive or USB device and it's compatible with FLAC, Apple Lossless, AAC, AIFF, MP3, WAV, WMA and Ogg Vorbis.

Digital connectivity includes an optical and two S/PDIF inputs (supporting up to 24-bit/192kHz and DSD64), the aforementioned USB-A and a USB-B for hook up to a computer. Analogue options incorporate unbalanced RCA inputs and both balanced and unbalanced outputs. The presence of a grounding post highlights that the moving-magnet and moving-coil phono stage of the DAC+ has been retained.

Around the front is a pair of 6.35mm sockets for feeding balanced

headphones. Decoding for MQA files is also hand for those that require it.

## Sound quality

From the very start it impresses with its superb clarity, fine detail retrieval, and an inky-black background from which the music emerges – regardless of whether streamed wirelessly from Spotify or Tidal, fed hi-res files via the superior wired LAN or music files pushed over from the PC via USB.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the S/PDIF, USB and LAN inputs sound a little more authoritative than music delivered via the wi-fi connection, the latter losing a little top-end sparkle.

Listening to Cigarettes After Sex's *K* via Tidal, the deliciously husky vocal performance is captivating, the music underpinned by a solid, weighty bassline boasting a well-defined 'roundness' to the notes that reveals the instrument's heft. When it comes to the lower frequencies, the Bridge never puts in anything less than a superb performance with basslines sounding taut and superbly detailed.

In terms of its ability to craft a believable musical soundstage, it fills the room with a sound that is not just precise but virtually holographic. And it does so seemingly effortlessly.

With an emphasis on more hi-res material delivered via USB and LAN, 24-bit/96kHz FLACs from Enya's *Dark Sky Island* serve up the lush sounds in a manner that's rich and

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Mytek Brooklyn Bridge

**PRICE**  
£2,500

**ORIGIN**  
USA/Poland

**TYPE**  
Network DAC/streamer

**WEIGHT**  
2kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
216 x 44 x 216mm

**FEATURE**  
● Inputs: 2x S/PDIF;  
1x optical; 1x USB-B;  
1x USB-A; 1x stereo  
RCAs (switchable  
line-level or MM/MC  
phono)  
● Outputs: 1x stereo  
RCAs; 1x stereo  
balanced XLRs;  
2x 6.35mm  
headphone jacks

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
HEM Sp. z o.o.,  
Poland

**TELEPHONE**  
+48 22823 7238

**WEBSITE**  
mytekdigital.com

**REVIEWED**  
*HFC* 461

unrestrained without being gloopy nor gushing. Next the 24-bit/96kHz FLAC of the Danish String Quartet's *Last Leaf* delivers the sounds of the harmonium, piano, glockenspiel and cello with real fire and finesse.

While it's unlikely that the main reason people will be buying the Bridge is for its prowess with vinyl, Chris Rea's *One Fine Day* is given a spin. Despite expecting the unit to struggle with a low-output MC, the sound is sumptuous. Even better, switching to MM is a revelation, the album delivered with all of its top-end sweetness intact. What's more, bass lines are again punchy and taut.

Finally, it's the turn of the headphone section. Putting it through its paces with a selection of different cans proves no less impressive than what's come before.

## Conclusion

Where the Brooklyn DAC+ impressed with its clean, detailed sound, the Bridge ups the ante by adding network streaming capabilities. Think of it as the cherry upon an already supremely impressive cake. **HFC**

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Exceptional bass performance; impressive sound; range of features

**DISLIKE:** Functional design; small screen

**WE SAY:** Regardless of the source – even vinyl – the Brooklyn Bridge offers up a supreme performance

★★★★★

# SUMIKO

## PHONO CARTRIDGES



## REFERENCE

### *Songbird Line*

The Songbird line represents the penultimate step in SUMIKO'S cartridge series, elevating overall performance and expectation firmly into the high end arena.

From the Songbird with its exceptional tracking ability and wide compatibility, through to the long-standing Blackbird and its exceedingly low noise levels and wide dynamic range, up to our reference open architecture design, Starling, with its microridge stylus on a Boron cantilever; each model promises to sing as beautifully as its name suggests.



### SONGBIRD

The sophisticated and smart Songbird design with its open architecture construction, new aluminium mounting body, low mass elliptical stylus and Alu coated cantilever results in a high end cartridge that lives up to its name.



### BLACKBIRD

The classic Blackbird design has a level of performance and clarity that competes with cartridges twice its price. Its been designed for exceedingly low noise levels exceptionally wide dynamic range and the highest possible fidelity.



### STARLING

No aspect of the Starling's design was left to chance. Our flagship open architecture cartridge renders the grandeur of an orchestra while still preserving air and space, also delivering responsive dynamics and deep silences.



# PS Audio DirectStream

**P**erhaps the only DAC that's big and ugly enough to return an intimidating snarl to the Chord Hugo TT2 overleaf is this: PS Audio's DirectStream DAC. The company refers to it as a DSD DAC not for its ability to play DSD files, but because whatever you put into it – PCM or DSD – comes out as a pure DSD stream. It's a DSD stream dream machine and, if the claims made by PS Audio are anything to go by, that's putting it mildly.

## The music sounds so seamless with a smooth, neutral, grain-less tonality

The point here is that, thus converted, compact disc (or any Redbook 16-bit/44.1kHz file) sounds like pure 1-bit DSD because, well, that's what it is. And if, as some argue, the best DSD is as close as digital has come to sounding like an analogue master tape, then surely sonic nirvana awaits the many of millions of CDs still in circulation.

As you might imagine, the tech required to do this didn't fall off a tree or, indeed, a chip manufacturer's shelf. Just as Chord has its Rob Watts, PS Audio has its Ted Smith and both designers use FPGAs and

custom coding to achieve their specific PCM and DSD-rooted ends.

This really is the DAC that keeps on giving as users can download the latest field updated software that promises audible improvements over the preceding release.

The DAC itself is sturdy and well finished. With no physical controls, operations are conducted via the touch-sensitive display or the remote. Files at up to 24-bit/352.8kHz and DSD128 can be handled via I2S (HDMI) from the matching Memory Player CD transport and there are also asynchronous USB, balanced XLR, coaxial and optical digital inputs.

## Sound quality

PS Audio will tell you that there's more music on a CD than you ever imagined and, uniquely, by converting PCM to DSD, the Direct Stream DAC accesses it for the first time. Some claim. But it doesn't take long to hear what the company's getting at. With the lushly orchestrated Randy Newman's *Brothers*, the thing that strikes us first isn't obvious 'clarity' and transparency but extraordinary low-level resolution and refinement, a majestic sense of composure and ease with the music – nothing pumped up, skinned back or otherwise manipulated to construct a particular sonic profile. Quite something when you consider the amount of signal reconstruction

happening inside under the hood. Meanwhile, Phil Upchurch's blissful guitar work and Mavis Staple's gospel-gassed vocal on *Winds Of Change* reveal that while detail, focus and intelligibility are all extremely good, it's the way the music sounds so seamlessly integrated and cohesive – with a smooth, neutral, grain-less tonality and natural balance – that sets such a scintillating standard.

## Conclusion

The difference this makes playing the excitingly 'live' and raucous CD of BB King at The Apollo is just as distinct' as that delivered by the Hugo TT2, though in presentation the two decoders plough their own paths. Where the DirectStream DAC makes a fair fist of sounding like a state-of-the-art analogue recording, it's hard to avoid the impression that the Chord isn't trying to sound like an analogue recording at all, but making a definitive case for digital superiority. Which gets the upper hand will depend massively on personal taste, but be in no doubt we're talking Godzilla versus King Kong here. **DV**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
PS Audio  
DirectStream

**PRICE**  
£4,860

**ORIGIN**  
USA

**TYPE**  
DSD-core streaming  
DAC/preamplifier

**WEIGHT**  
10kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
430 x 100 x 360mm

**FEATURES**  
● Supports sample rates up to: 24-bit/352.8kHz PCM and DSD128  
● Digital inputs: 1x coaxial; 1x optical; 2x I2S (HDMI); XLR balanced; 1x USB; Network Bridge slot  
● Analogue outputs: single-ended RCA; balanced XLR

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Signature Audio Systems

**TELEPHONE**  
07738 007776

**WEBSITE**  
psaudio.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 468

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Superlative, analogue-like sound; touchscreen interface

**DISLIKE:** Takes up a lot of space

**WE SAY:** If you want digital to sound like a very good turntable, look no further

## Marantz SACD 30n

**THE SACD 30N** combines network playback, USB DAC functionality, USB DAC facility and CD playback with an SACD/CD transport and compatibility with file formats all the way up to 32-bit/384kHz PCM and DSD256 via USB and 24-bit/192kHz and DSD128. Streaming capability includes the likes of Amazon Music HD, Spotify and Tidal, both Bluetooth and Apple AirPlay2 are built-in, and the Heos implementation brings multi-room capability and the ability for some functions to be accessed by voice control using Amazon Alexa or Google Assistant.

### Sound quality

What Marantz has always majored on is all that hi-fi cleverness going on below the surface, while the presentation glides serenely from the speakers, and that's as true whether

you ask this do-it-all disc player to crash out some rock or pop on CD, or play close-detailed jazz or classical music on SACD. The sound has a warmth and generosity that's hard not to like, without becoming over lush and cloying, thanks to a sparkling and airy midband and treble that really bring out the ambience and atmosphere of recordings.

That ability allows it to deliver remarkable presence with Emily Barker's *A Dark Murmuration Of Words* set, with its stripped-back instrumentation, or alternatively to slam through the 2020 remaster of The Stones' *Doo Doo Doo Doo (Heartbreaker)* from *Goats Head Soup*, with its chopping guitars, ripe brass and backing vocals and plaintive

guitar solo. There's exceptional clarity here, but never any sense that it's being forced on you, so well integrated is the sound.

Used with speakers not exactly known for being bass-shy – in this case an elderly PMC OB1 and Neat's Iota Xplorer (HFC 435), using transmission-line and isobaric bass architecture respectively, the SACD 30n in combo with Marantz's Model 30 shows its ability to deliver a lot of bass and start and stop it smartly.

This disc spinner does a fine job of taking established building blocks and sonic traits, and reworking them for what will hopefully be a new generation of Marantz buyers. **AE**



### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Marantz SACD 30n

**PRICE**  
£2,700

**TELEPHONE**  
0208 1034770

**WEBSITE**  
marantz.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 468

### OUR VERDICT



## Rotel CD11 Tribute

**THE CD11 IS** about as simple as CD players get. Using a 24-bit/192kHz DAC from Texas Instruments it delivers audio to its analogue outputs, while a coaxial digital output is also provided. Custom damping material has been added to eliminate vibrations and ringing, and attention has also been paid to the mechanical grounding of the player and its electrical ground paths.

### Sound quality

Comparing an original KI-Signature player with the CD11 Tribute, it isn't hard to hear the same thinking at work. True, the older machine has its foibles after almost a quarter-century of use – its drawer shrieks and just occasionally it fails to read a disc – but what's clear is that both it and the new disc spinner have that same direct communication of what's being played.

Listening to *Get Here* by Oleta Adams it's easy to hear the shaping of the voice, the reverberation and the simple instrumentation, with the piano and bass especially vibrant. But what's even more impressive is that the performance is just as it should be.

In essence, whatever you throw at it just sounds special, from full-orchestral music to driving rock. There's weight, there's warmth and there's richness, but there's also air and space, and a sense that the music's being given room to breathe. That enables this CD player to draw the listener into what's being played as well as covering up any deficiencies it may have when compared with much bigger – and more expensive – setups.

Similarly the CD11 Tribute isn't fazed by the more demanding challenges of big orchestral/choral works, as we discover playing the dramatic recent Alpha recording of Haydn's *The Creation*, packed as it is with information. Even with the outburst of "Let there be light" at the opening, there is no sense that it is hardening up or losing its focus in any way.

If you're a silver disc enthusiast that's in the market for an affordable player with more than a sniff of star quality, the A11 Tribute breathes new life into the format, is rather special and puts up very strong competition for the established favourites in this entry-level sector. **AE**



### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Rotel CD11 Tribute

**PRICE**  
£400

**TELEPHONE**  
01903 221710

**WEBSITE**  
rotel.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 469

### OUR VERDICT





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# Astell&Kern

## A&norma SR25

**A**stell&Kern's entry-level temptation is a luxury item in every sense and merely the Korean brand's most affordable expression of its high-end ethos. Carried over from the previous SR15 are two Cirrus Logic 43198 MasterClass DACs in a dual mono configuration, though a new, low-noise PCB is said to have improved the final sound quality. The SR25 supports native DSD256 and 32-bit/384kHz audio and therefore doesn't downsample 32-bit files for 24-bit playback and convert DSD128 files to PCM 24-bit/176kHz. Another first for the SR25 is the inclusion of Sony's 24-bit compatible LDAC Bluetooth codec alongside aptX HD and A2DP, though plugging the player into a home wi-fi network is equally straightforward.

On the top panel are 3.5mm and balanced 2.5mm headphone jacks while, at the opposite end, there's a microSD slot for expanding the 64GB

internal memory and a USB-C port, a little larger than the more typical micro USB socket. Claimed battery life is a fairly spectacular 21 hours of continuous music playback.

### Sound quality

We kick off proceedings with a 24/192kHz FLAC of Elvis Costello and The Attractions' glorious *Lipstick Vogue*. Starting with a pair of Meze 99 Classic headphones (HFC 410), it becomes obvious what a killer combo well-mastered 24/192 and a dual-DAC DAP of this calibre can be.

It's a track that on CD, while fast and energetic, can sound overly sharp, aggressive and in your face. Here, the breathless pace of Pete Thomas' drumming, Bruce Thomas' lithe and fluid bass and Costello's high velocity vocal combine still greater impetus with honed and polished leading edges, a more finely graded tonal palette, a greater sense of texture, depth and acoustic

ambience. The anticipated brittleness appears to have receded. The music is more potent and harder hitting yet also richer, smoother and much easier to listen to.

Transparency is superb. The SR25's ability to expose nuances of technique and capture what might otherwise be vanishingly subtle ambient cues is something of a marvel and, with microSD cards duly switched, almost magically teases out unsuspected sonic subtleties from the usually slightly dark and dense sounding 24-bit/44.1kHz recording of Stuart McCallum's *Vital Space* from the album *Distilled*. This slow saunter through a distinctly cinematic, multi-sampled, ambient soundscape is airier and more fluent, acquiring an immersive quality that makes it easier to hear exactly what's going on and, in turn, minimises listener fatigue.

Even with plain old Red Book 16-bit/44.1kHz, the sophisticated, keyboard-led funk of Joe Sample's *All God's Children* from his *Spellbound* album, the SR25 manages to mine finer things, the combined talents of Sample's Steinway, Marcus Miller's bass guitar, Lenny Castro's percussion and Omar Hakim's drums driving the track along powerfully but with sublime style and grace. The sonic results are equally satisfying when using the A&K to stream wirelessly via a wi-fi network (we try KEF's LSX HFC 456, Cyrus' ONE Cast HFC 464 and Geneva's Aerospheré Large HFC 407) and not least, via Bluetooth, to a Chord Hugo 2 (HFC 428) DAC in the main system.

### Conclusion

If you're really into DAPs, the A&norma range stretches deep into exquisite high-end territory and you'll need deep pockets to go there. The good news is when the best in the business makes its entry-level product, it tries just as hard. The price isn't cheap, but you'll struggle to find better. **DV**

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Astell&Kern  
A&norma SR25

**PRICE**  
£650

**ORIGIN**  
South Korea

**TYPE**  
Hi-res digital  
audio player

**WEIGHT**  
178g

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
64 x 108 x 16mm

**FEATURES**  
• Supports WAV:  
FLAC; WMA; MP3;  
OGG; APE; AAC;  
ALAC; AIFF; DFF;  
DSF; MQA  
• Storage: 64GB  
plus microSD  
(up to 1TB)

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Exertis Unlimited  
Ltd.

**TELEPHONE**  
01279 822800

**WEBSITE**  
astellkern.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 465

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

##### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

##### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

##### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

##### FEATURES

★★★★★

##### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Rich, transparent, rewarding sound; design and build; features

**DISLIKE:** Nothing at the price

**WESAY:** Quite simply, probably the only DAP you'll ever need

# Nagaoka MP-500

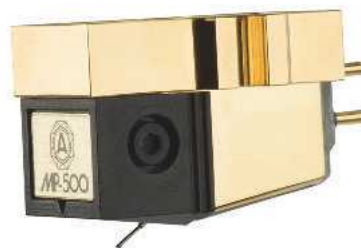
**AS THE FLAGSHIP** pick-up, the MP-500 sports the combination of a super-fine polished line contact stylus and a boron cantilever. It puts out a fairly average 3mV and load resistance is a standard 47k ohms, so it should work with pretty much any MM phono stage. The body weighs a highish 8g. The stylus is-replaceable and is locked in place by a small Allen bolt for extra rigidity and tracks between 1.3g and 1.8g; we run it at the upper limit and it proves most secure. The boxy oblong body makes alignment easier than some and the general fit and finish is impressive. Sadly, it's inevitable that the shiny gold body ends up covered in our grubby fingerprints.

## Sound quality

The MP-500 has a lot of everything; it's tonally warm without going over the top, it has a slightly soft but

strong and tuneful bass and a lovely, delicate and finely resolved treble. In the midband, this cartridge bristles with detail yet this isn't presented in a forensic or analytical way. Rather, it's sweet and supple, with a really good rhythmic flow. There's also a remarkable lack of surface noise.

Cue up The Bodines' *Therese* and a recording that tends to sound vague, brightly lit or frenetic elsewhere suddenly seems beautifully balanced. We're especially drawn into those distinctive vocals, which some cartridges tend to make a little bland. The timbre is crystal clear. The same goes for Thomas Dolby's *Field Work*, which is massively compressed and dense, but the MP-500 just scythes through it. It seems to have more conspicuous spaces between the notes, with inky black silences where rivals have a tendency to just smear things.



Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* has a cathedral-like soundstage inside which the instruments are accurately located. Not only this, but you can hear right back into the hall. Instrumental timbre is excellent; strings sound lustrous and there's almost a glow to violins. This is neatly tied into a living, breathing feel to the performance; the MP-500 giving a great sense of flow without sounding forced. A brilliant all-round moving magnet, this shames even some respected moving-coil designs. **DP**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Nagaoka MP-500  
**PRICE**  
£760  
**TELEPHONE**  
+31 334 554511  
**WEBSITE**  
nagaoka.co.jp  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC 467

## OUR VERDICT



# Ortofon MC Anna Diamond

**NAMED AFTER OPERA** diva Anna Netrebko, the MC Anna ditches the rigid boron cantilever of its predecessor in favour of an even more rigid diamond rod. Weighing in at 16g, it requires a tonearm with medium-to-high effective mass. It has a quoted compliance of 9cu and is claimed to track optimally at 2.4g. Output is said to be 0.2mV, which is low for a modern moving-coil.

## Sound quality

This is one of the very best moving-coil cartridges to pass through *HFC* and it excels at pretty much everything it turns its hand to.

If forced to be super pedantic, we might suggest vinylistas that maintain that analogue sound should be sweet, warm and romantic might want to look elsewhere as the MC Anna Diamond does not attempt to add or subtract when it comes to

what's imprinted in the groove. Instead it simply communicates what's there with mesmerising imaging capability, sublime clarity and insight and a supreme sense of the recording's dynamics. Add to the mix fine detail retrieval the likes of which we've never experienced anywhere else, and you've got a pick-up that can squeeze out vast amounts of information from even the duller of recordings.

A criticism that's frequently levelled at vinyl is that it can sometimes sound rather vague and diffuse in the way that it goes about reproducing the recorded acoustic. The Ortofon shatters this idea, showing just how precisely things can snap into focus when a serious cartridge is employed.

An early eighties pressing of Cocteau Twins' *Victorialand* perfectly underlines the point. *Lazy Calm* can sound rather opaque and fluffy on all



but the very best carts. And yet the MC Anna Diamond picks through every single element of the mix, positioning the different multi-tracked guitars so precisely that they could have their own GPS coordinates. Meanwhile the keyboard that normally gets lost in the sonic mush becomes vast in scale, pushed out far left and right in the soundstage to create an almost cavernous effect.

From its impeccable engineering to the way that it drags even the duller recordings into sharp relief, this is a very special pick-up indeed. **HFC**

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Ortofon MC Anna Diamond  
**PRICE**  
£7,250  
**TELEPHONE**  
01235 511166  
**WEBSITE**  
ortofon.com  
henleyaudio.co.uk  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC 463

## OUR VERDICT



## Rega Ania Pro

**DESIGNED TO BRIDGE** the gap between Rega's £500 Ania (HFC 452) and the recently introduced Apheta 3 priced at £1,250, the Ania Pro adopts the original vital profile stylus and tapered aluminium cantilever used by the Apheta to provide higher performance, combined with the simpler body construction that's found on the Ania.

Three-point fitting ensures that the cartridge naturally aligns and sets the overhang in a Rega tonearm and with a weight of 6g and a tracking force of between 1.75 and 2g, it should be easy to accommodate.

### Sound quality

Like the standard Ania, the PPS body of the Pro has the effect of softening and sweetening the presentation. The result is that Arcade Fire's *Keep The Car Running* has a warmth that's not displayed by either Apheta

design in quite the same way. This perceived warmth means some of the fine detail is harder to discern, but it has a rhythmic energy and the effortlessly funky *Rose Rouge* by St. Germain succeeds at engaging on an emotional level. The flowing manner in which the Ania Pro goes about making music is as effective with this jazz electronica as it is with slower and more considered material like Mazzy Star's *Into Dust*. Listening back to back with the Apheta 3, some of the immediacy of the more expensive moving-coil cartridge is lost – although the Ania Pro is still fast and fluid.

Criticisms of the Ania Pro are fairly limited. The 0.35mV output is lower than some rivals and may prove an issue in systems with more limited gain available, such as when testing with the Luxman SQ-N150 integrated valve amplifier that appeared in HFC 460. Additionally, compared with its



Apheta brothers, its ability to make sense of very complex material is reduced slightly, but there is little at the asking price that can decisively better it. In many ways, the Ania Pro takes the strengths of the now discontinued Apheta 2 and adds an extra dose of civility and warmth for a more attractive outlay. The resulting cartridge feels rather more complete and as well as being an excellent option for Planar 6 and 8 turntable purchasers, should be on everyone's shortlist at the price. **ES**

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Rega Ania Pro

**PRICE**  
£750

**TELEPHONE**  
01702 333071

**WEBSITE**  
rega.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 460

### OUR VERDICT



## Sumiko Blue Point Special EVO III

**AS THE LATEST** incarnation of the long-standing Blue Point Special moving-coil range, this is the Japanese manufacturer's lowest-cost, high-output MC offering. It is available as either low or high-output and weighs in at 8.3g. The EVO III is the most affordable Sumiko offering to utilise an ultra-low resonance open generator design. This features a resonance-controlled mounting plate in order to offer the lowest possible mechanical impedance. It is ideally suited to tonearms of effective mass between 11g and 25g.

### Sound quality

We start off listening to Lyn Stanley and her Jazz Mavericks' *London With A Twist*. Stanley's sultry jazz style is smooth, effortless, yet highly detailed. The performance is scarily realistic, with a soundstage that

extends well beyond the confines of the speakers with great depth and superb instrument focus.

With a live performance of Vivaldi concertos played by Interpreti Veneziani, the music is equally captivating. We're able to locate all of the eight players across the room. The soundstage has impressive depth and the EVO III turns out a remarkably sophisticated performance.

Austria's 7RAY in both studio and live recording environments is sparkingly clear. With the studio recordings, there is a real sense of intimacy to the vocals that stand out from the accompaniment. The additional atmospheric dimension that comes from live performances is beautifully captured.

Moving to a full orchestra and the slow and tense opening *adagio* of Beethoven's *Symphony No.4 in B flat major* played by the Munich



Philharmonic, leads to a deeply moving and very pure experience. We're treated to a highly refined performance, and when the piece progresses into the cheerful *allegro vivace*, the playing is powerful and extremely exhilarating. This piece perfectly demonstrates both the outstanding imaging and the solid and well-controlled bass.

The Blue Point Special EVO III is certainly a great cartridge and one of the best high-output options we have heard at this price point. **NR**

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Sumiko Blue Point Special EVO III

**PRICE**  
£600

**TELEPHONE**  
01235 511166

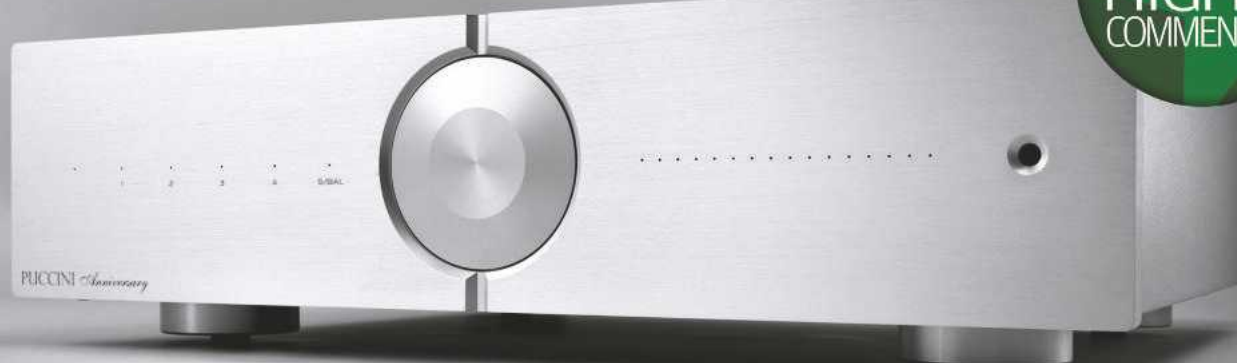
**WEBSITE**  
henleyaudio.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 461

### OUR VERDICT



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“ More than worthy of an extensive audition... a near ideal performance. ”

- James Parker/Paul Miller, HiFi News

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**Andrew Everard  
and Paul Miller**

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## Novafidelity HA500H

**THE HA500H IS** both a headphone amp and a DAC, and with its built-in volume control can also be used as a preamp straight into a power amplifier or even active speakers. Headphone outputs include a choice of balanced or unbalanced sockets and low and high outputs. With two user-selectable output stages – instead of just solid-state – you can opt to bring into play a valve-powered stage.

### Sound quality

This is an exceptional product that delivers a sound as big boned and powerful as it is detailed and sharply focused. With the many varied styles and influences of Coldplay's *Everyday Life* in 24-bit/96kHz, the way nuances of the recording spring out is as persuasive as the overall rhythmic drive and the way the catchier tracks work their way into

the listener's head. And with the drop dead voice of Rachael Price on her *Rachael And Vilray* set, the HA500H just about places every breath in your ear, with a gloriously luminous presentation packed with both character and soul.

With the basic sound being both gutsy and fine detailed, is the valve output option here the magic bullet for those who prefer their music rich and lush? Not quite. While there is a difference when switching between the two output modes, in that the valve stage is a shade smoother and warmer, it's not a radical change, and the effect will vary according not only to the headphones with which the amplifier is paired, but also from album to album.

For us, the valve balance is a bit too rich with Bowers & Wilkins P9



Signature headphone hooked up. Switching to the solid-state stage perks things up a touch, whereas with the more studio-oriented Focal Spirit Pro headphone the valve output does a good job of warming things up a little bit more.

With its impressive combination of workmanlike build, solid engineering and supreme sound, the HA500H has an obvious appeal to headphone enthusiasts. Keep the inputs digital and go easy on the flexibility on offer, and this is a fine choice for those that are looking for a combined DAC and headphone amplifier for home use. **JP**

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Novafidelity  
HA500H

**PRICE**  
£2,200

**TELEPHONE**  
03301 222500

**WEBSITE**  
scvddistribution.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 459

### OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

## T+A HA 200

**THIS MARKS T+A'S** first ever foray into headphone amplifiers and throws in network connectivity and a DAC for good measure. Outputs including a standard 6.35mm jack, balanced 4.4mm Pentaconn and four-pin XLR socket cater to a wide range of listeners. Each output has its own individual selector so you can have three headsets connected at once, although you'll only actually be able to use two of them.

### Sound quality

The HA 200 can comfortably drive pretty much any headphone you care to match it up with. Regardless of the cans partnering it, it doesn't hesitate to drive them in an entirely convincing manner, irrespective of whether it's using conventional unbalanced or balanced connectors.

Kicking off listening with Dana Zemstov and Anna Fedorova's

*Silhouettes* in DXD, it's not so much the confident weight and delicacy of the piano or the timbre and bite of the accompanying viola, but more the open, spacious yet intimate acoustic that's captured in the recording.

It effortlessly creates an entirely coherent, 'out-of-the-head' listening experience. Listening to the Vasily Petrenko and Oslo Philharmonic's recording of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*, it's impossible not to be impressed by the sheer force of the large orchestra, persuasively recorded to emit a free-breathing, uncompressed and hugely dynamic sound.

The jangly pop of Sports Team's *Deep Down Happy* displays a deft mixture of power and flexibility to make every lyric crystal clear while allowing the music to flow.



Even Ella Fitzgerald's 1956 *Live At Zardi's* sweeps the listener up as the immediacy of the recording shines through the atmosphere of the evening. It's powerful stuff alright.

While it's all too easy to quibble about the lack of analogue outputs, very few headphone amps are able to take you on such an epic sonic journey, and combined with a seemingly endless array of tweaking options and flexibility, it's difficult to see this as anything other than the perfect option for those that take their headphone listening seriously. Just because it's high-end, doesn't mean it doesn't know how to have fun. **HFC**

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
T+A HA 200

**PRICE**  
£6,600

**TELEPHONE**  
01225 704669

**WEBSITE**  
taelektroakustik.de  
theaudiobusiness.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 467

### OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

## Audio-Technica ATH-CKS5TW

**LOOKING BIG AND** chunky and weighing in at 8g, there's a reason for the size and weight as this in-ear is packed with features. The 10mm driver boasts a frequency range of 5Hz-40kHz while the battery offers 15 hours of playback. The charging case allows you to recharge the earbuds twice before needing a boost itself. The bundled carry case is pretty compact and has a USB-C port for charging so that you can top it up from your laptop.

### Sound Quality

One of the standout features of the ATH-CKS5TW is the far-reaching frequency range, which immediately makes itself apparent with the ambient soundscape of Max Richter's *Shadow Journal*. The earbud is able to embrace the deep, electronic bass far more effectively than many larger rivals at this price

point. There's an impressive sense of space too, as the pulsating bass rumbles off into the distance. Reaching higher, the earbud is able to coax a beautiful plaintive tone from the violin, and then just stand back and allow the strings to linger gently in air. There's room for each instrument to find its place too, with the gentle ambient wash of the electronically looped harps creating an almost hypnotic effect in the background.

That balanced, spacious sound works equally well with denser arrangements. For example, the big wall of sound on Kate Bush's *The Big Sky* is a riotous delight, allowing the cascading drums to crash all around, while the slower beat of the bass drum lands firmly and controls the pace. The slap-bass guitar riff has a taut muscularity worthy of Prince and the earbud manages to keep everything clear and distinct as the

layers of drums and chanted vocals pile up all around the soundstage.

Switch to something lighter and the ATH-CKS5TW continues the good work, taking the change of pace effortlessly in its stride. The ticking cymbals that kick off Blondie's *Rapture* have a crisp, taut feel and there's a hip-swaying rhythm to the bass guitar that is almost irresistible. The only real disappointment is that there's no noise-cancellation option available, although that's perhaps a lot to expect at the asking price. **CJ**



### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Audio-Technica  
ATH-CKS5TW  
**PRICE**  
£150  
**TELEPHONE**  
0113 2771441  
**WEBSITE**  
eu.audio-technica.com  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC 463

### OUR VERDICT



## Bowers & Wilkins PX7

**WIRELESS HEADPHONES ONLY** sound as good as the transmission protocol that's employed. The PX7 has aptX Adaptive, offering aptX HD's sound but with low latency and high error resilience. With data rates of between 279kbps and 420kbps, this compressed format is still far from bit-perfect CD but does now beat top-quality AAC.

Its noise-cancelling functionality, uses digital processing and four microphones to shut out much of the outside sound. The battery claims nearly 30 hours use in Bluetooth noise-cancelling mode or five hours from a 15-minute charge.

### Sound quality

Tethering the PX7 to an iPhone, we're more than a little surprised by what greets us – a big, punchy and fulsome sound, with real body and impact. At the same time, there's

no sense of it sounding leaden; it's musically enjoyable and engaging too. Tonal balance is slightly rich; likely deliberately so. Bass isn't over the top, but it's not exactly hiding from the listener.

Moving up to the midband, the PX7 is surprisingly crisp and detailed on low and medium NC settings. The squeaky clean rock of *Sands Of Singapore* by Café Jacques is insightful and nuanced. The snare drum sound has great impact and shows this headphone's dynamic alacrity.

We were not expecting the smooth but well-etched hi-hat cymbal sound we get from 4hero's *Look Inside*. There's no sense of hardness or glare, even though the instrument is conveyed with plenty of sparkle. We would go so far as saying the PX7 has a distinctively B&W house sound – it's tidy, composed, intricate and detailed. As we ramp up the volume to the maximum level our

ears can take, things remain smooth and composed. All of this rather distracts from just how effective the noise-cancelling is; the variable settings are great and it's way better than similar designs of just a few years ago.

Although no match for a high-end wired design, B&W's PX7 does incredibly well for music on the move – offering an elevated listening experience amidst the hustle and bustle of the city. An essential audition if you're a serious music lover that likes to be on the go. **DP**



### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Bowers & Wilkins  
PX7  
**PRICE**  
£350  
**TELEPHONE**  
0800 2321513  
**WEBSITE**  
bowers-wilkins.co.uk  
**REVIEWED**  
HFC 459

### OUR VERDICT



## Dan Clark Audio Aeon 2 Closed

**A TIMELY UPDATE** to the Aeon Flow (HFC 435), the Aeon 2 has a new planar driver structure that flips the original design 180° in an effort to remove flow disturbance from the magnets between the diaphragm and the ear. Available in either closed or open-backed guises (both costing £900), the former provides a claimed “warmer, fuller tone” while the latter opts for a “leaner midrange”.

### Sound quality

The most immediate characteristic is the pinpoint and detailed soundstaging, albeit imaging very much within the head with no impression of spanning out further. Listening to the *Storm* movement of Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony*, the drums have a huge impact. Every tiny inflection in the violins is clean and distinct, while it's easy to follow

the interplay between the different players. With Dave Brubeck's *Blue Rondo À La Turk*, the struck metal percussion that is evident on some rivals is notably muted. However, the Aeon 2 does an engaging job of replicating all of the subtle electronic sound effects that buzz around the soundstage in Pink Floyd's *On The Run* along with a glorious bloom to the piano and bass on Claire Martin's intimate *He Never Mentioned Love*. Here, every syllable is crystal clear and although the voice is set forward, there's nothing to mar the confident nature of the performance.

The Beatles' *Please Mister Postman* reveals the clarity and exuberance of the lyrics, while the closed-back headphone marvellously captures the thundering bass during Richard Strauss' *Alpine Symphony*, replicating the lower register instruments of the orchestra with ease.



With its 2m cable and neat folding action for easy storage, it would appear that the Aeon 2 Closed is best suited for those that like to listen to their music on the move. For those that like lower frequencies, the impressive bass extension is a real boon although the treble could do with being a touch more extended. Having said that, the soundstage is spacious and insightful, meaning that at the price this deserves to be high on any serious audition list. **HFC**

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Dan Clark Audio  
Aeon 2 Closed

**PRICE**  
£900

**TELEPHONE**  
01494 956558

**WEBSITE**  
electromod.co.uk

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 462

### OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

## Sennheiser Momentum 3 Wireless

**THIS LATEST VERSION** updates the Momentum 2 Wireless, which is still on sale at £300. The 3 focuses on recent technical updates, such as the use of a USB-C connector for charging and audio input and a conventional 2.5mm connector (with a 2.5mm-to-3.5mm cable included). Bluetooth wireless features have been updated too, adding AAC and aptX Low Latency for improved syncing of audio and video in addition to the existing aptX codec. It's a shame the Momentum 3 Wireless hasn't been bought up to date with aptX HD or aptX Adaptive.

The Momentum 3 Wireless also offers a shorter battery life than its predecessor, reduced from 22 hours to just 17. Admittedly, that's long enough to see you halfway around the world on a flight, but it still leaves Sennheiser lagging behind many of its noise-cancelling rivals.

### Sound quality

Although wireless, the inclusion of both analogue and digital cable connectors and the relatively modest battery life confirm that wired is the way to go for optimal performance.

Starting with noise cancellation turned off, we're impressed by the crisp, precise timbre of the piano intro on Queen's *The Millionaire Waltz* and the full, firm bounce of the bass guitar. There's a lovely breathless tone to Mercury's voice and the Momentum doesn't flinch as the guitar and drums come crashing in – it's the breaking-glass shimmer of Taylor's cymbals above it all that drives the song along.

Next up Max Richter's *Shadow Journal* tests the Momentum's bass delivery. The deep electronic effects sound almost like tectonic plates shifting and rumbling in the distance, yet it doesn't lose sight of the gently plucked harp, and there's a dramatic



sense of space created by the distance between the two extremes of sound. The Momentum maintains that sense of space with Kate Bush's vocals on *My Lagan Love* and the richness of her voice seems to echo all around. The only disappointment is that the noise-cancelling feature isn't quite as effective as it could be. Aircraft noise is dramatically reduced, but there's still a low hiss of sound leaking in at times. The same is true with the background noise, which is more sternly dealt with by some rivals. **CJ**

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Sennheiser  
Momentum  
3 Wireless

**PRICE**  
£350

**TELEPHONE**  
0333 2408185

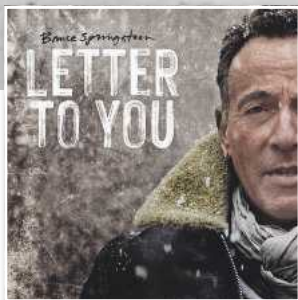
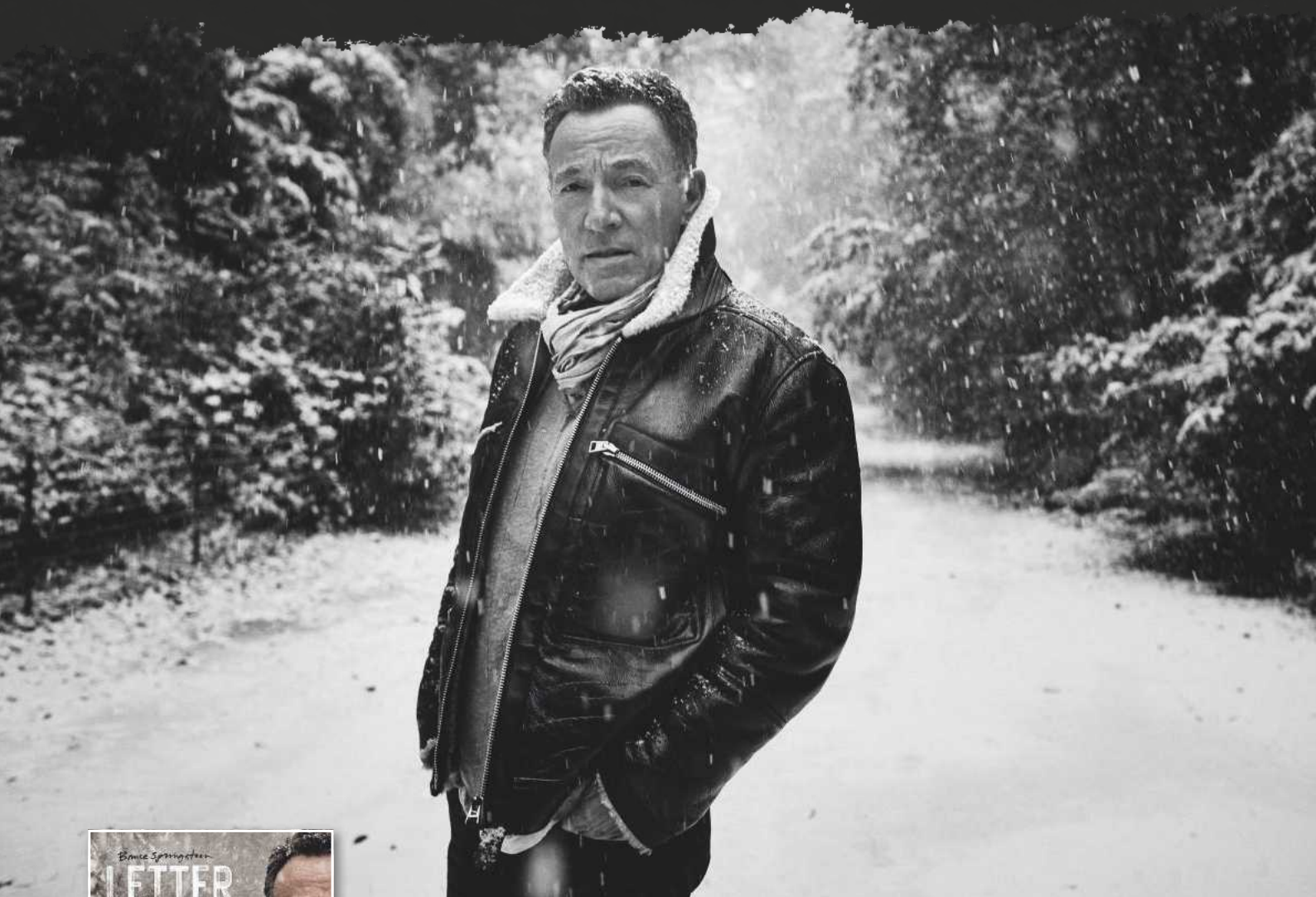
**WEBSITE**  
en-uk.sennheiser.com

**REVIEWED**  
HFC 457

### OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

# Musicreviews



## Bruce Springsteen Letter To You

★★★★★

CD Columbia

**THE BOSS HAS** made a habit of nailing the zeitgeist at critical moments in recent history. His 2002 album *The Rising* was a cogent message of resilience in response to 9/11. Five years later, *Magic* was another state-of-the-union address that confronted the disillusionment of the Bush years and the Iraq war, while 2012's *Wrecking Ball* was a potent, angry response to the financial crash and corporate greed.

However, his last album – 2019's *Western Stars* – took a detour. Unlike almost anything else in his canon, its orchestral pop was elegant enough, yet seemed indulgent rather than essential. As Springsteen turned 70, you wondered if he would ever make the kind of finger-on-the-pulse, universal statement that had characterised his career from *Born To Run*. We should have had more faith.

*Letter To You* was recorded just before the world went into lockdown, and yet it seems to be exactly

the kind of record we need right now. He's done it by going back to basics, calling up the E Street Band and making the most unabashed, signature-sounding Springsteen heartland album since perhaps *Born In The USA*.

Nine new songs – plus fresh, urgent versions of three often-bootlegged, never-released songs from the early seventies in *Janey Needs A Shooter*, *If I Was The Priest* and *Song For Orphans* – help us look forward to a time when we can start to live again, reminding us of when everything seemed possible.

Recorded live in the studio over just five days, the songs are populated with the classic root-rock trademarks that characterised Springsteen in his pomp. The wholehearted vocals, the surging guitars of Nils Lofgren and Steve Van Zandt and the twanging tropes of Springsteen's Gretsch, Roy Bittan's rippling piano and swelling organ, the

gated drums of Max Weinberg and the clarion sax riffs (Jake Clemons, nephew of Clarence, who died in 2011) – they're all gloriously here.

Loss and a sense of mortality abound on the elegiac *Last Man Standing* and *Ghosts*. Yet the mood is not bleak and wintry; rather it holds the promise that spring will come again. Nowhere is this more evident than on the title track, on which Springsteen sets out: "to summon all that my heart finds true". At the same time, the escapism is tempered by reality – it won't take a genius to guess the identity of the "criminal clown" who has "stolen the throne" in *House Of A Thousand Guitars*.

Springsteen has talked of the album's retro feel as a "summation" and there isn't anything new or especially ground breaking here. But in these strange, fearful times what we surely need is reassurance and this album offers it in spades. **NW**



## Prince

Sign O' The Times

★★★★★

CD

Warner Bros

**DESCRIBED AS HIS** *Sgt Pepper*, this was Prince's most purple of patches. The 16 original tracks have had the audio Mr Sheen applied and sound wonderful. It's an exhilarating listen, the title track, *Strange Relationship*, *Adore*, *If I Was Your Girlfriend*... I'll stop there as it's all fabulous. The Super Deluxe edition adds 45 previously unissued studio tracks and two concert recordings plus some combustible jams and a geniuses-only pow-wow with Miles Davies. It's not so much a sign o' those times, but one for all time. Essential! **PSH**



## Grimes

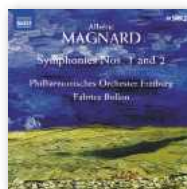
Miss Anthropocene

★★★★★

CD

4AD

**NOW RECOGNISED AS** a bonafide popstar, Claire Boucher's fifth album hangs off a shaky climate change narrative with a decidedly morose tone. But don't hold that against her. With her voice bent all out of shape (think Mariah Carey spliced with Björk but on helium) over the glorious synths, skittering beats and booming sub-bass, Grimes describes the sound as "ethereal nu metal". While the sentiment of the former is spot on, the inclusion of banjo, acoustic guitar, birdsong and some sickeningly catchy melodies make this a stunning release to celebrate for its originality. **JDW**



## Albéric Magnard

Symphonies Nos 1 and 2  
Philharmonisches Orchester Freiburg  
Fabrice Bollon

★★★★★

CD

Naxos

**FRENCH COMPOSER MAGNARD'S** four symphonies are serious, imposing works – atmospheric, sober, well crafted and unquestionably worth getting to know. Think Bruckner with a mild French accent. Naxos' new disc of *Symphonies 1 & 2* follows a slightly earlier recording of 3 and 4. The performances are excellent – well played, weighty and idiomatic – while the recording is rich toned, sonorous, and refined. Magnard might have been unlucky in life, but his four symphonies have always been recorded well. And this new one at a budget price is right up there with the very best of them. **JH**



## A Winged Victory For The Sullen

The Undivided Five

★★★★★

CD

Ninja Tune

**THE AMBIENT AND** neo-classical duo return with their third full-length album. Dustin O'Halloran and Adam Wiltzie once again present a listening experience that is spectral as much as it is transportive. With grand themes of life and death, *The Undivided Five* is a stunningly beautiful and fragile collection of tunes. The opener, *Our Lord Debussy*, is an obvious paean to the classical master, but it sets the blueprint – melancholic, mournful piano stabs, gently ebbing and flowing, adding washes of electronica until it builds into a euphoric crescendo. It's a soothing and thoughtful album that, in places, is simply spellbinding. **PH**



## The Divine Comedy

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★★★★★

12x vinyl

Divine Comedy Records

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**PJ Harvey**  
Dry Demos

★★★★★

180g vinyl

UMC/Island

**WHEN THE WONDERFUL** Polly Jean Harvey released her band's debut LP in 1992, the first 5,000 copies came bundled with the demo versions of *Dress*, *Sheela-Na-Gig* et al. Now released for the first time since, those that missed out can hear how the tracks started off life. Though this is about as far from a remastering as it's possible to get, the strength of Harvey's performance and power of her lyrics ensures that the stripped-back simplicity of these demo versions reveals a new side to an album that remains every bit as vital now as it did upon its original release. **JDW**



Picture credit: Maria Mochnac



**The Flaming Lips**  
American Head

★★★★★

CD

Bella Union

**WAYNE COYNE NOTES** that the band's goal here is to be a "different version of The Flaming Lips," claiming Tom Petty and The Grateful Dead as influences. While strictly speaking this has not been fully achieved, there is a tighter focus here that has been missing on their last handful of releases. There are some really beautiful melodies drifting in and out of songs like *Mother Please Don't Be Sad*, *Assassins Of Youth* and the truly stellar, transportative *Flowers Of Neptune 6*, and sonically it's constructed beautifully, subtly and imaginatively. The good news is this is their best record since *The Soft Bulletin*. **PH**



**EOB**  
Earth

★★★★★

CD

Capitol

**IN ALL HIS** years playing guitar with Radiohead, Ed O'Brien never felt the need to make his own music away from the group – until now. At least nobody can accuse him of a lack of ambition on his solo debut under the moniker EOB. Produced by Flood (PJ Harvey/U2), the songs range from delicate folk and stark acoustics to euphoric house and stomping glam-rock plus a lovely duet with Laura Marling on closing ballad *Cloak Of The Night*. While we continue to wait for a follow up to Radiohead's *A Moon Shaped Pool*, *Earth* fills the void nicely. **NW**



**Shirley Collins**  
Heart's Ease

★★★★★

CD

Domino

**THIS MIX OF** new compositions and traditional material hangs together movingly and is a testament to the enduring power of the legendary singer, now in her eighties. Collectively, they are a masterclass in communicating emotions: her simultaneously heartwarming and heartbreaking voice adds a chill to the warm summer air on *The Christmas Song* and layers poignancy onto *Whitsun Dance*. Like Dylan's revelatory, rough and rowdy new album, this can be easily filed alongside Shirley Collins' greatest work – it's that moving. **SB**

Picture credit: Enda Bowe

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## Laura Marling

### Song For Our Daughter

★★★★★

CD **Chrysalis**

**MOST MAJOR ARTISTS** scheduled to put out albums this summer have pusillanimously postponed release until 2021 fearing lost sales. In response Marling took the brave step of bringing forward the release date of her album by three months as she thought we needed entertaining and cheering up. "It felt like a nice gesture," she says. "Hopefully it's a good record to listen to at home. It's hardly an album of party bangers."

Even before you've heard it, *Song For Our Daughter* books its place as album of the month for that alone. Put it on the turntable and you swiftly realise it's more than a nice gesture and Marling may have gone and made the album of the year.

Bold, poetic and lyrically sophisticated, the songs deal with youthful hopes, growing up, falling in and out of love and all the other stuff that life throws at us. But *Song For Our Daughter* feels less self-absorbed and confessional than her past releases, the songs built conceptually around a series of life lessons written to an imaginary unborn child about: "what it is to be a woman" and how to get by in this mean old world.

In the hands of a lesser songwriter such a theme would be either pretentious or saccharine, but Marling is far too smart to fall into either trap. There's nothing preachy about these songs. Rather, they're graceful, elegant and worldly wise stories that reach beyond the emotional introspection that until now has been her primary currency. Written after reading Graham Greene's novel, *The End Of The Affair* picks up the narrative from the point of view of the mistress. *Alexandra* is a reflection on gender politics that references Leonard Cohen's *Alexandra Leaving*.

If this is Marling in lyrically more expansive mood, musically this is a lush, poppier aural world than she has previously inhabited too, with gorgeous string arrangements by Rob Moose (Antony and the Johnsons/Bon Iver/The National). As a musician she's still clearly in thrall to Joni Mitchell, but you can also hear the influence of KD Lang (*Held Down*), Rickie Lee Jones (*Only The Strong*), Sheryl Crow (*Strange Girl*) and Paul McCartney (the string-laden piano ballad *Blow By Blow*.) The album ends with the simple pop charm of *For You*, recorded at home with her boyfriend and heard here in its informal demo loveliness.

Marling was just 18 when she released her debut album, *Alas, I Cannot Swim*. A dozen years and six albums later that earned her Grammy nominations, Brit Awards and Mercury nods, *Songs For Our Daughter* is sure to follow suit and establishes her as a Mitchell for the millennial generation. **NW**



**Beethoven**  
Symphonies 5 & 7  
NDR  
Radiophilharmonie  
Andrew Manze



SACD

**Pentatone**

**THE PAIRING OF** Beethoven's 5 and 7 turns one's thoughts to the white-hot intensity of Carlos Kleiber's essential coupling from the seventies. Manze's approach may be more mainstream, but there is no lack of passion and imagination in his well-proportioned interpretations. The famous *Allegretto* of the *Seventh* is taken at a fairly broad 'crotchet-equals-65', which allows the movement to unfold with a stately grandeur. The Hanovarian orchestra plays with great conviction, with a strong bass section and excellent wind playing. The surround-sound mix is particularly involving, with a deep string tone and clear woodwinds. **JG**



**Art Blakey & The Jazz Messengers**  
*Just Coolin'*



CD

**Blue Note**

**BLUE NOTE'S ARCHIVES** keep coming up trumps, this time with an unreleased recording from 1959 of a band that is pretty hot considering the title. Recorded by Rudy van Gelder it has a refined sound for its age with typical double mono presentation and a thin tone on Bobby Timmons' piano, but great-sounding brass. With Hank Mobley on tenor and Lee Morgan on trumpet this means some great grooves backed up by Blakey's snappy playing, which makes for drive that doesn't get in the way of the leads. *Just Coolin'* is a worthy addition to Blakey's already impressive oeuvre. **JK**



**Charlie Parker**  
The Savoy 10-Inch  
LP Collection



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**Craft Recordings**

**SPANNING HIS TIME** at the legendary jazz label between 1944 and 1948, this collection featuring the unmistakable be-bop style of 'Yardbird' serves as a perfect introduction to Parker's innovative virtuosic technique. The blindingly fast passing chords of *Bluebird* or advanced harmonics of *Constellation* still sound devastatingly radical now, nearly 80 years after the event and while the recordings aren't as clean as modern equivalents, the simplicity of Parker's horn with piano, double bass and drums is a joy to behold. Glorious. **JDW**

**AUDIOFILE VINYL**



**Ry Cooder**  
Jazz

180g vinyl

**Speakers Corner**



**DON'T LET THE** title of this album fool you, this is not jazz in any of the usual senses of the word. Made in 1977, it consists of tunes from the early part of the 20th century, and largely obscure ones

at that, unless you're a fan of Bix Beiderbecke, Joseph Spencer or Dave Lee Roth. The opening song, *Big Bad Bill Is Sweet William Now* was covered by Roth, but it's hardly a standard. As with the other 10 tracks, Cooder's version is acoustic and full of joy with some fabulous playing from fine musicians. Among them are

Earl Hines (piano) and David Lindley (mandolin), while the rest play brass, marimba, vibes, organ and drums with the occasional appearance of a 'quartet' (as in the barber's shop variety).

With all-acoustic instruments and analogue recording, this is a beautiful-sounding record thanks to the rich tone of the (sometimes big) band and the quality of playing, the tuba bass lines and vibes adding to the depth of timbre. Highlights include *Nobody*, which could be a Randy Newman song but is a much older Bert Williams number with great humour and some lovely harmonies. Cooder called it a: "thread of alternative jazz settings to some great music," he just left out the word lovely. **JK**

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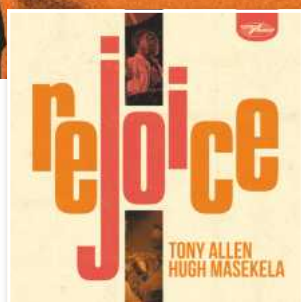
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## Tony Allen & Hugh Masekela Rejoice

★★★★★

CD World Circuit

**WHEN TONY ALLEN** and Hugh Masekela first met in the seventies they were in their early thirties, but were already giants of African music. Forced into exile by the apartheid regime, Masekela was the pre-eminent ambassador of black South African music, his jazzy trumpet-playing instantly recognisable for its burnished sound and indestructible groove. As the drummer with Africa 70, the Nigerian-born Allen was the co-inventor of the mighty sound of Afrobeat alongside Fela Kuti, with whom he recorded more than 30 albums.

Over the next four decades, their paths crossed regularly at jazz and world music festivals and every time they met they talked about recording an album together. Busy schedules meant the idea stayed on the backburner until 2009, when Allen was recording a solo album in London with Nick Gold, owner of the World Circuit label.

When Allen mentioned he'd been talking with Masekela for decades about making a collaborative album, Gold jumped at the idea and booked them into his studio over a weekend in 2010.

With none of the material pre-written, recording commenced with Allen playing a drum pattern to which Masekela added a melody on his horn and a few jive-laden vocal chants. The process was direct and spontaneous and by the end of the weekend they had an album's worth of material.

The plan was to reconvene at a later date and add the finishing touches. But once again busy schedules intervened and the tapes were left for almost another decade. Following Masekela's death in 2018, Allen contacted Gold and told him it was their duty to finish the album as a tribute.

Assisted by a new generation of musicians from London's thriving nu-jazz scene, it was finally

completed in 2019, with added sax, keyboard and vibes for light and shade, but keeping the mix uncluttered with the dialogue between Allen's drums and Masekela's trumpet as the centrepiece.

With almost half a century between conception and completion, the results are wondrous – an exhilarating mix of ambidextrous West-African rhythm and jazz improv, Afrobeat and swinging township jive, but occupying its own unique aesthetic space. Try the skittering uplift of *Obama Shuffle Blues*, the percussive swing and exquisitely phrased brass of *Coconut Jam* or the ineffable, minimalist cool of *We've Landed*.

For those who appreciate old-fashioned album artwork, there's the bonus of the coolest cover you've seen in a long time, recreating the spirit of those classic Blue Note LPs – although you'll need the 12in vinyl version to relish its full glory. **NW**



Miles Davis picture credit: Alamy



## Miles Davis The Lost Septet

★★★★★

CD

Sleepy Night Records

**THIS DOUBLE ALBUM** recorded at a concert in Vienna in 1971 has never previously been released and as the only legacy of a stellar band is a treat. With Keith Jarrett on keyboards, Gary Bartz on sax, Stevie Wonder sideman Michael Henderson on bass and a trio of percussionists, the ensemble plays with the loudness and intensity of a rock band on material drawn from albums including *In A Silent Way*, *Bitches Brew* and *Live Evil*. There's no electric guitar, but Davis makes up for it by playing high notes on his trumpet through a wah-wah. **NW**



## Dvořák Cello Concerto Staatskapelle Berlin Daniel Barenboim

★★★★★

CD

Deutsche Grammophon

**HERE'S A GREAT** performance of Dvořák's ripe, lyrical *Cello Concerto*. Kian Soltani's full warm tone and aristocratic-poise exudes nobility. His playing – inward and ruminative rather than flashy or dramatic – shows sovereign command, but there's no lack of passion. The result is deeply felt, refined, technically assured and always perfectly in tune. Barenboim and the Staatskapelle Berlin provide superlative support, and the fillers – arrangements of pieces for solo cello backed by the orchestra's cellists – are attractive. The sumptuously rich recording has excellent clarity and detail. **JH**



## Pet Shop Boys Hot Spot

★★★★★

CD

x2 Records/Kobalt

**THE BELOVED PURVEYORS** of supremely hooky electronica are back with more digital oomph than ever. Neil Tennant's beguiling Eeyore vocals tell of *A Wedding In Berlin*, some *Monkey Business* and other acutely observed scenarios. But as memorable as the lyrics are, it's the pulsating music that delivers the big thrills. Amid the melodic stompers and pulse pop rompers there's room for the Pet's obligatory wistful plodders and *Only The Dark* is a plum addition to the canon. The duo's 14th album continues their unbroken 35-year run of top-notch pop. **PSH**



## Future Islands As Long As You Are

★★★★★

CD

4AD

**WHEN DAVID LETTERMAN** left his desk to congratulate Future Islands on a scorching performance back in 2014, expectations were set that perhaps were never quite met. *As Long As You Are* rights this wrong. The eighties synth-pop is still in place as Samuel T Herring's vocals oscillate between Leonard Cohen and Christopher Lee, but there's a new sweetness in the mix. *Glada* allegorises elusive love for lapping waves at dawn, while *For Sure* juxtaposes stomping energy with unvarnished vulnerability. It's an 11-track drama-pop buffet that finally delivers on that early promise. **PSH**



## Rachmaninoff In Lucerne Rhapsody Op.43 Symphony No.3 Lucerne Symphony Orchestra

★★★★★

CD

Sony Classical

**BOTH WORKS WERE** the composer's last major compositions, written at Rachmaninoff's villa on the shores of lake Lucerne. The composer was forced to leave the house in the summer of 1939 as war loomed over Europe. Alas, he never returned, and died an exile in the USA in 1943. Rachmaninoff's own Sena Steinway is used by Abduraimov for the *Rhapsody*, in a pacey, fluent, idiomatic performance. The symphony – a sensitive brooding piece – is full of half-lights and resigned nostalgia. Good recordings – clear, open, detailed. A fascinating 68-page booklet outlines the story of the composer's Swiss years in words and pictures. **JH**

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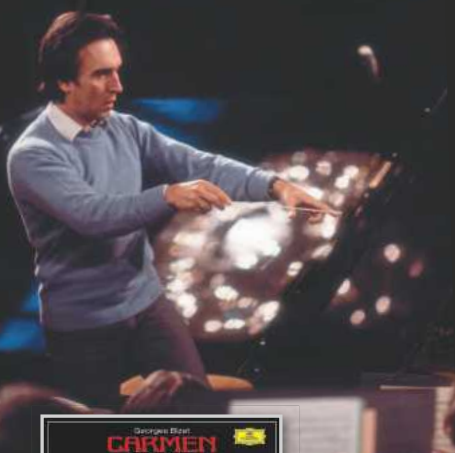
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Richard Black,  
Hi-Fi Choice, Oct 2012



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## Georges Bizet

Carmen

Berganza, Domingo, Cotrubas, Milnes, London Symphony Orchestra  
Claudio Abbado

★★★★★

2x CD, 1 Blu-ray

Deutsche Grammophon

**THIS FAMOUS RECORDING** was made in 1977, following a run of performances at the Edinburgh Festival. It's a vivid exciting account, and those who caught it live describe the experience as unforgettable. Teresa Berganza plays Carmen as a strong-willed woman – passionate, fearless and independent – rather than a cheap, slutty vamp. Domingo impresses as the doomed besotted Jose; Milnes swaggers as Escamillo and Cotrubas is a sympathetic Micaela. But the real stars

## DG has remastered the analogue tapes at 24-bit/192kHz for Blu-ray Pure Audio

are Abbado and the LSO who bring burning intensity to every note. For Blu-ray Pure Audio, DG has newly remastered the analogue tapes at 24-bit/192kHz (two-channel stereo and 5.1 surround), plus a Dolby Atmos remix at 24-bit/96kHz. The sound is even more vivid and detailed than before. I played the original LPs from 1978, and the increased clarity of this new BR-A is immediately apparent. **JH**



Discovery Zone  
Remote Control

★★★★★

CD

Mansions and Millions

**IMAGINE IF YOU** can that Grimes had chosen to swap her calling-card abrasive synths and skittering electronic beats for something a bit more organic and uplifting, taking in elements of Cocteau Twins, Julee Cruise and Lowlife along the way and you begin to get an idea of where New York-born, Berlin-based filmmaker and musician JJ Wehl is heading with *Remote Control*. With an irresistible mixture of eighties-sounding pads, catchy melodies and floaty swirling guitar and keys, this is a perfect slice of electronic pop with substance. Perfect for long summer's nights. **JDW**



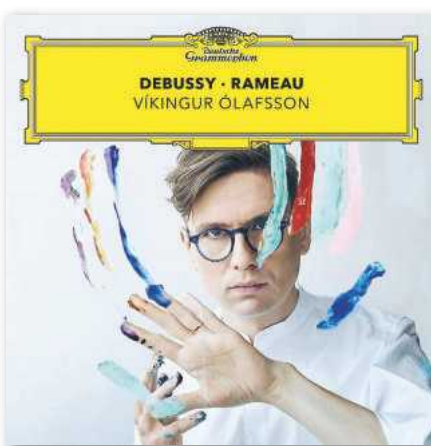
## Debussy, Rameau

Víkingur Ólafsson

★★★★★

CD

Deutsche Grammophon



**Debussy was notoriously critical of most composers, except Jean-Philippe Rameau**

**DEBUSSY'S UNEXPECTED ADVOCACY** of Rameau in 1903 (when he was almost forgotten) led to a revival of interest in this baroque composer. For his new DG album, Víkingur Ólafsson mixes works by the two to fascinating effect. Rameau gets 20 pieces to Debussy's 8. And that's good; Rameau is far less often heard on a concert grand, and encountering his music on piano (rather than harpsichord) gives it a fresh new dimension. Ólafsson's pianism is notable for its amazing tonal colour, dynamic control and complete relaxed authority. DG's recording sounds full, detailed, and refined, with impressive dynamic contrasts. **JH**

## AUDIOFILE VINYL

★★★★★

Eivind Aarset & Jan Bang  
Snow Catches On Her Eyelashes

180g vinyl

Jazzland



**EIVIND AARSET IS**

a mainstay of the Norwegian music scene, a guitar player who uses his instrument in such a diversity of ways that you can't really pin him down.

Jan Bang works with samples, synths and programming and here combines field recordings and 'found sounds' to conjure up a strangely organic album that projects a range of atmospheres with its otherworldly explorations. Broadly fitting into the ambient world view, it has some beats but these don't generally make too strong an impression,

*Asphalt Lake* being the rule-proving exception with a very deep soft-edged bass churn that adds to a ship at night feel. The sound on *Snow Catches On Her Eyelashes* is both hazy and clear, this is what makes it stand out from the mass of ambient releases, it has been very well put together and engineered and is particularly rich and rewarding on vinyl.

Contributions from fellow Nordiks Nils Petter Molvær (trumpet), Sidsel Endresen (vocal) and Hilde Norbakken (piano) are generally hard to discern in the overall wash, save for piano which provides a tune of sorts on *Before The Wedding*. A hard album to describe, but certainly an easy one to drift away with. **JK**



## Nubya Garcia

### Source

★★★★★

CD **Columbia**

**LATE LAST YEAR** I wrote a column about the dramatic rebirth of British jazz around a group of progressive artists in their twenties and early thirties from diverse backgrounds who have developed their own dynamic alternative scene.

This new jazz scene operates on a democratic, open-door principle that says: "If you can blow, come and join us." I wrote, and proceeded to drop a few names – Moses Boyd, Shabaka Hutchings, Joe Armon-Jones, Zara McFarlane, Sons Of Kemet and Ezra Collective among them.

The piece also quoted the hugely exciting tenor saxophonist Nubya Garcia. "I'm paying homage to modal jazz, which I love, but there's loads of other influences in there, too," she told *HFC*.

Now comes her debut solo album and she wasn't kidding for *Source* is a thrilling collision of jazz classicism with dub, Latin, Afrobeat, R&B, neo-soul,

ambient and much else besides. Alongside the Mercury Prize-shortlisted *Dark Matter* by Moses Boyd – on which Garcia also plays – *Source* stands as the finest statement yet to emerge from Britain's rich and vigorous jazz renaissance.

Born in North London in 1991 to parents from Guyana and Trinidad who arrived as part of the Windrush generation, she grew up in a musical family and started first on piano and then violin and viola, which she played in the London Schools Symphony Orchestra. By the age of 10 she was playing clarinet and sax.

Trained at the Royal Academy of Music, Boston's Berklee College of Music and Trinity, she graduated in 2016 and burst onto the London jazz scene, playing on albums not only by Boyd but also Sons Of Kemet, Shabaka Hutchings, Ezra Collective and Joe Armon-Jones, who acts as her pianist here.

Backed by double bassist Daniel Casimir and drummer Sam Jones, her playing is by turn sinuous, fiery, meditative and lyrical. You can hear traces of her influences – Rollins on *Inner Game* and Coltrane on *Together Is A Beautiful Place To Be* – but it's her singular personality that shines through, whether on the gorgeous *Stand With Each Other* with its soulful, wordless vocalising or *La Cumbia Me Está Llamando* with its exotic South American spice. Elsewhere the 12-minute experimental title track fuses dub reggae and Pharoah Sanders-style cosmic jazz before the album ends with *Boundless Beings*, the closest thing to a conventional song with an exquisite vocal from Chicago songstress Akenya.

Garcia describes the album as: "A story about my heritage, my ancestry". It's a spectacular journey with some stunning scenery along the way and we're privileged to join her on it. **NW**

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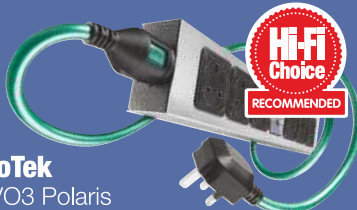
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# All apologies

In our new 'woke' world, artists are suddenly being held to account for perceived past songwriting sins. **Steve Sutherland** reckons it stinks

**R**emember the good old days when it was us against them and you knew whose side you were on? The BBC would get its knickers in a twist over Frankie Goes To Hollywood's pervy *Relax* and all the other naughty, "tasteless" tunes that it banned from the airwaves and we'd snigger with glee. The music industry fixing it so that Rod Stewart's *I Don't Want To Talk About It* pipped The Sex Pistols' *God Save The Queen* to number one despite selling way less copies just to save her Madge from embarrassment! Ah, those bumbling fools, so easy to ridicule and rebel against.

When The Rolling Stones were invited to perform *Let's Spend The Night Together* during *The Ed Sullivan Show* on American TV, they were told to change the words to "Let's spend some time together" so as not to foist their wanton immorality on an impressionable youth. And, to their never-ending shame, Mick and co sheepishly complied. Not so, however, Jim Morrison, who showed young master Jagger exactly how it should be done when he agreed to change the lyric of *Light My Fire* from, "Girl, we couldn't get much higher" to "Girl, we couldn't get much better" then sauntered out on the self-same TV show and sang the so-called offending line just as he'd always intended.

Dear old AC/DC were widely denounced as Satanists once serial killer Robert Ramirez, the self-proclaimed Night Prowler, explained to his arresting cops that he was inspired by

## The Rolling Stones were lambasted for playing *Under My Thumb* in live shows

the track of the same name on their mighty *Highway To Hell* LP Marilyn Manson was unjustly pilloried for inspiring the dreadful Columbine school massacre, Ice T was death-threatened for Body Count's *Cop Killer*, and Tipper Gore famously formed the PMRC, getting all the albums she didn't like warning-stickered in the Walmarts of this world. More recently still, Theresa May played Mother Superior and head mistress combined as Home Secretary, banning Tyler The Creator from the UK because she found his songs a little distasteful.

But what to make of 2020's very modern attack on nasty pop – the drive to enforce self-censorship. It began with some folks taking offence at the word "faggot" in The Pogues' *Fairytale Of New York*. No-one gave a toss when it first came out in 1987. The problem's arisen because the song's so popular that it has outlived the liberalism from whence it was born and survived to be re-assessed in the light of our new, more sensitive, paranoid, finger-pointing, blame-slanging, social-media-outing 'woke' era where



**Nick Cave tells it like it is...**

everyone seems to be on trial all the time for just about everything. And, disheartening as it sounds, we, the one-time rebels, are now the prosecutors and judges.

The Rolling Stones were recently lambasted for including their 1966 song *Under My Thumb* in their live shows, critics suggesting they should shove its sexist carcass under the carpet where they insist it belongs.

## The blame game

Earlier this year, Nick Cave was asked by a fan whether he ever felt the need to change lyrics to songs he'd written a few years back when performing them live today. Mr Cave's response I think (I hope) speaks for us all: "What songwriter could have predicted 30 years ago that the future would lose its sense of humour, its sense of playfulness, its sense of context, nuance and irony, and fall into the hands of a perpetually p\*\*\*ed-off coterie of pearl-clutchers? How were we to know?"

"Perhaps we writers should have been more careful with our words – I can own this, and I may even agree – however, we should never blame the songs themselves. Songs are divinely constituted organisms. They have their own integrity. As flawed as they may be, the souls of the songs must be protected at all costs. They must be allowed to exist in all their aberrant horror, unmolested by these strident advocates of the innocuous, even if just as some indication that the world has moved toward a better, fairer and more sensitive place.

"If punishment must be administered, punish the creators, not the songs. We can handle it. I would rather be remembered for writing something that was discomforting or offensive than to be forgotten for writing something bloodless and bland." Bravo sir, say I. Bravo ●



## BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM



**Small size needn't be an impediment to beauty as Astell & Kern and Audeze (HFC 444) ably demonstrated**

Picture credit: Adobe Stock/Shutterstock.com

# Beautiful Obsession

**Ed Selley** celebrates 10 years of being uplifted as he looks back over a selection of dream setups

**B**eautiful Systems has been a staple of *HFC* for well over a decade and in that time, it has covered a fantastically bewildering variety of equipment. For more than five years, I've been the lucky soul who has sat down in front of these wildly disparate setups and dusted off my most enthusiastic language to try and convey some of that experience. At times, I've touched on the nature of

what it is that makes these endlessly variable systems just so enchanting and so, with the small hiatus brought about by Coronavirus and the difficulties of moving and shipping equipment around, I've got the perfect opportunity to take stock and expand on that notion.

At first glance, the constituent parts that make up the various systems look completely disparate without a shred of commonality between them. The

only thing that can be accurately applied to each and every piece of equipment that has passed through over the years is that it makes music. The mechanics of how they do that has otherwise defied classification. Setups have relied on CD, vinyl and streaming for their source material. They have used valves and solid state (and on occasions, both) to generate power outputs between eight and 800W. They have used transducers



**Luxman and DALI (HFC 457) combined to spectacular effect in both sound and visual aesthetics**

## BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM



that have varied between devices I could probably squeeze into if the drivers were removed, to ones I could fit in my pocket. Price is not and never has been a consideration for *Beautiful Systems* but that has also varied by an enormous amount.

### Look of love

Perhaps most confusingly of all, the many setups have looked dramatically different too. Beauty is, of course, a subjective concept, but it is inevitable for those of you that have been regularly reading *HFC* that not every system is going to have appealed as much as every other. Some have been supplied by companies who would find the idea that they set out to make their equipment beautiful to be absurd so, for every monument to chrome, there have been some rather more business-like designs too.

And yet, despite this, every single one of the systems I've had the pleasure of listening to has possessed a certain beauty. I'd be lying if I said I coveted them all equally, but without exception every individual experience has elicited moments of pure joy. And it's this joy that sits at the crux of

what makes a beautiful system. It's not a measurable construct and it manifests itself in myriad ways. What I have always set out to do when I write up my findings is to try and get a handle on that pleasure and how any particular setup achieves it.

This is because they do so in very different ways. Some are masters of tonal accuracy; able to render voices and instruments in a manner that

### The sheer variety of design philosophies on offer is an endless source of wonder

doesn't so much suspend disbelief as cause a genuine disconnect between what the eye sees and the ear hears. Others can deliver space and scale so effectively that the room they are in ceases to have any perceptible impact on the sound they create. There are some, meanwhile, that take the construct of 'timing' and deliver on it so effectively that you can't simply be an onlooker to the music they make; you become actively involved. And a

**Dynaudio and NAD (HFC 436) gave us a technological masterclass with superlative performance**

select number have actually managed to do all of these things at once.

Some of this definable character is down to the fact that we are not usually considering a single product, but a collection of them. Almost everything else that we look at on these pages is considered and critically appraised as a standalone product. With a *Beautiful System* there is the means to judge not the individual components, but the cumulative whole. More often than not, they serve to demonstrate how the careful combination of source, amp and speakers is able to create something that is greater than the sum of its parts. With some of the more affordable systems in particular, the demonstration of real synergy results in performance that is far beyond their advertised worth.

### Pleasure principle

Unpicking these relationships and understanding how and why they create the results they do is an exercise I never tire of. The effect a certain source or amp can have on the way that speakers perform is a source of endless joy. Every time I think I know



how a system is going to perform before I listen to it, there are surprises and lessons to be learned. Together with the *Dealer Visits* features, the broadening of my understanding of what works and why has been a continually enjoyable lesson and one I hope has made it across to you in some of the pieces themselves.

### Beauty and the beats

Then of course, there is the hardware itself. I've already noted how beauty is subjective, but over the years I have had the privilege of spending time around some truly spectacular components. The sheer variety of design philosophies that are on offer is an endless source of wonder. We have seen everything from components that are genuine living fossils, in production in one form or another for decades, all the way through to the bleeding technological edge of what is currently possible. Some of the most fascinating systems have managed to combine both in a way that seems improbable, but works like a charm.

I also love the details that abound on these setups and that remind us

**Primare and Falcon Acoustics (HFC 451) came together for an affordable but still highly enjoyable combo**

that this industry is as much about art as it is science and engineering. This artistry manifests itself in different ways and demonstrates the huge variation in design philosophies that make up two-channel audio almost as much as the engineering that goes into their sonic performance. Even more so than the engineering, there is no one true path and that element

### Every single one of the systems I've seen has possessed a certain beauty

has made the variety of design approaches we've seen over the years a real voyage of discovery.

The experience of living with some components has been a pleasure in itself. They are a joy to interact with and some of them have lifted my mood simply by being in the same room. To be clear, nothing ever sounds better because it has a VU meter, immaculately machined control or achingly lovely book-matched veneer applied to it, but

equally, nothing has ever sounded worse simply because a little care and attention went into its construction. They have reminded me that while our ears should be the final arbiter of the equipment we choose, making sure we enjoy the other aspects as well is almost as important.

### Soul shaker

What this all adds up to is that even though the equipment that has customarily filled these pages has been as varied as the industry itself, what ties it all together is that it manages to move the soul as much as it appeals to the rational part of the mind. It doesn't matter whether the equipment is a burly pro-audio refugee with the sort of power output you could probably weld with in an emergency or a system that makes a handful of watts go an extraordinary distance, it's the hook of emotional engagement and the beauty that results that really ties all these systems together. The most exciting thing of all is that, even though we're over a decade in, the possibilities of what we can look at next are almost limitless. Here's to a beautiful future ●

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# Seeds of creation

With loudspeaker design combining both science and art, **David Price** discusses seminal hi-fi models and explains why perfection remains but a pipe dream

**T**here are many iconic loudspeakers in the great hi-fi firmament. From the original Klipschorn and Quad ESL-57, to the BBC LS3/5a, Spondor BC1, KEF 104ab, Mission 770, Yamaha NS-1000M and B&W 801. And let's not forget the Wharfedale Diamond, Celestion SL6, Acoustic Energy AE1 and Epos ES14. I'm sure you could name many more. Every last one of them to my ears is flawed, some terribly by modern standards others only surprisingly slightly. But what hearing – and owning – some of them over the years tells me is that there's no such thing as a perfect loudspeaker.

This isn't just down to the limited materials science of the time or the lack of computer-aided design software, it is as much a philosophical issue. For me, the greats that stand head and shoulders about the others are ones that were totally focused on playing one particular role. The Quad ESL-57 (and its ESL-63 brother), BBC LS3/5a and Yamaha NS-1000M are arguably the most striking. The Quad was a quasi-full-range electrostatic, offering super-fast transients due to the feather-light electrostatic panels. The BBC was an unapologetic compact near-field monitor offering a limited bandwidth, but great purity of tone for its time. The Yamaha was a true full-range monitor with ultra-low distortion and superb speed due to its super-light metal drive units. None tried to compromise

## There are multiple ways to produce a loudspeaker, but all involve compromise

dependent they are. Both the Quad and Yamaha are very enjoyable to listen to with most genres, yet they really excel when playing material that particularly suits them. The BBC design, however, is far more music dependent due to its built-in physical limitations.

Let's first look at the Quad ESL-57. To me, it's one of the finest midrange drivers – it has a wonderfully delicate midband that's able to fluently communicate the rhythms inside the music. It's excellent spatially too, giving an expansive and wide open window to the recording. On the downside, it can only shift a certain amount of air – and so cannot play that loud and can't go particularly deep in the bass. Its bottom end is taut and sinewy, but lacks guts.

The BBC LS3/5a is basically the Quad on steroids, minus some transparency. It too has a lovely midband, albeit one that by modern standards is a little soft and coloured. Still, the tone you get when playing classical music is quite something; it sounds exquisite on strings and brass, for

in order to please a wider audience.

Having listened to all of them in the past month, it's fascinating to see just how music



**Quad's ESL-57:** one of the finest midbands around

example, giving an almost nicer-than-real-life experience. Yet again it runs into trouble outside the midband; treble is decent, but not a patch on a modern speaker with a ribbon tweeter and bass is hugely lacking; it just chops the bottom couple of octaves right off. That's not really a criticism, just an observation of fact.

The Yamaha NS-1000M attempts to deliver a Quad-like midband, one that's full of delicacy and detail but with fewer of that speaker's compromises elsewhere. It uses a complex three-drive unit arrangement married together cleverly to give a phase-coherent sound that benefits from ultra lightweight beryllium treble and midrange drivers. Meanwhile, a big 300mm paper bass unit does the business down below. It's a blast. Big, fun, fast and loud, it has the sort of insight that approaches a modern B&W 800D. Yet for all its skill, it doesn't quite have that seamless, 'all of a piece' sound of the Quad and is unduly fussy about what's driving it.

## Champion of champions

The results? Well, the Quad and BBC are brilliant with classical music and decent with jazz. The Quad is also superb with electronic music too, if you can live without the bottom octave. The Yamaha is very good with all sorts of music, but not sweet enough to really fly with jazz. On the other hand, it's amazing with rock and electronic music. The BBC is lovely with classical, but rather poor with rock and electronic music.

All this teaches us is that there are many different ways to make a stunning loudspeaker, but all involve real compromises which end up making it less than a perfect all-rounder. Even today, with all our clever technology and materials science, we still face exactly the same dilemma. Loudspeaker design continues to be both a science and an art – and so will it always be ●



# Passion project

Two brands with the same strong ideas combine to leave **Ed Selley** floored

**A** recurring theme in the origin stories of many hi-fi manufacturers is that they stem from a dissatisfaction with how existing rivals dealt with something that was of prime concern to the person who founded the company. Spurred to correct this imbalance, many have gone on to carve a very successful business out of doing just that. What happens when you combine two such brands to form a system though? Is the result harmonious or do the opinions end up cancelling each other out?

Alluxity came into being over quibbles with design. It argues that high-end hi-fi is frequently a giant, room-dominating mass that makes no attempt to blend into a space... And much as I love an amplifier big enough to jump start a planet, it has a point. The Danish brand creates equipment that sits harmoniously in rooms without compromising performance or facilities.

On paper at least, it looks to have succeeded. The Pre Two is both a fully balanced analogue preamp – and when Alluxity says ‘fully balanced’, it means it even down to a power supply per channel – with a selection of analogue inputs. It additionally has a streaming module with a DAC that means you can simply run it as a Roon endpoint with no need for source equipment. Combined with the Power One power amplifier, also fully balanced, and boasting a 200W output, you have a ▶

## COMPONENTS

### ALLUXITY PRE TWO £8,900

The Pre Two is the intelligent combination of a fully balanced analogue preamp with a single RCA and XLR input and a digital board with four digital inputs and an Ethernet connection for network audio, all controlled by a relay type volume control on a touchscreen.

### ALLUXITY POWER ONE £8,800

The Power One is a balanced design – also making use of the dual power supply arrangement seen in the Pre Two. It has no parallel output devices and zero global feedback and develops 200W per channel, a figure which almost doubles into 400W.

### FINK TEAM BORG £22,900

Designed to embody the key design features of the flagship WM-4 in a smaller package, the Borg combines a 260mm mid/bass driver with an air motion transformer in a cabinet formed from separate layers of MDF with damping in between and extensive bracing.







self-contained system that occupies the sort of space that some rivals would struggle to produce one in.

Partnering the Alluxity pair is the Fink Team Borg. Fink Team has worked in the consultancy business for many years. The Borg is the second speaker to bear its name and be produced directly by the team. It effectively embodies all the ideas the company feels are critical to performance in a more room-friendly form than the range-topping WM-4 – which, as befits any device whose name is an abbreviation of ‘washing machine’, is suitably hefty.

### Easy driver

The Borg is a two-way floorstander that combines the unlikely duo of a 260mm mid/bass driver with a 64 x 64mm air motion transformer. Handing over from such a large driver to an AMT is no small feat, but the Borg achieves it with a completely flat response that is unaffected regardless of axis. Just for good measure, it’s admirably easy to drive. The drivers themselves are placed inside a cabinet that takes the ideals of constrained

layer damping and runs with them until you wind up with a pair of 52kg cabinets you don’t so much walk around as orbit.

As a combination, these two very different design philosophies work together in a way that is unexpected but rather wonderful. If you’re going to offer your products in a vivid orange finish, you need to make very

### The Borg has the sort of shove associated with being a little too close to an explosion

sure the build stands up to the scrutiny that will result, and the Pre Two and Power One are more than up to the challenge. The finish is exquisite and means that they are unexpectedly tactile as well as being rather pretty. The Borg by contrast has presence. In any of its finishes, it exudes purpose and the feeling that there isn’t a single part present in anything other than the pursuit of sonic perfection. Together, there’s a

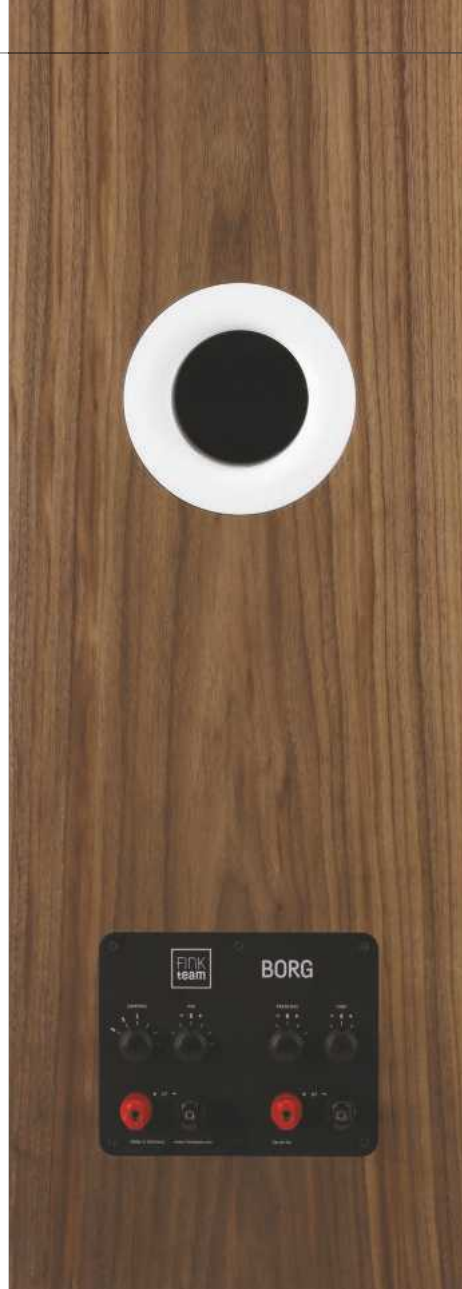
**Alluxity’s orange casework is a thing of wonder**

happy combination of beauty and brute force that is deeply appealing.

Some of this perception carries over into the sonic performance too. You might assume a speaker that shares a name with a merciless alien race from the *Star Trek* universe might embody some of those traits, but that really isn’t the case. The gospel-tinged *Coast Is Clear* by Seasick Steve is reproduced with a cossetting edge to it. Without losing any of their nuance and realism, Steve Wold’s vocals are incredibly rich and vivid. They hang in the space between the speakers with an uncanny sense of the man itself. Close your eyes and he’s there in a way that rivals cannot achieve.

### Gently does it

One of the reasons why this is so successfully simulated is the level of delicacy with which this system can reproduce voices, sounds and effects. Bjorn Berge’s cover of *Woodstock* is ephemeral in its mastering and never gains any unwanted heft. 200W coursing through a 260mm driver could easily leave recordings sounding unnaturally burly, but that’s



never the case. No less impressively, this isn't tied to volume either. If you want to listen loud, you can and the result is still delicate at the same time.

### Boom, shake the room!

Be under no illusions though, when the time for daintiness ends, it has plenty of answers. Giving it the brooding Scandinavian electronica of Carbon Based Lifeforms and the ability of the Borg to move air starts to manifest itself. The original version of *Supersede* has a slow building but effortlessly seismic bassline and the Borg delights in the sort of sternum-loading shove you normally associate with being a little too close to an explosion. The grip that the Power One maintains is mightily impressive too. Each low note is a perfectly delivered impact rather than a low drone of noises blending into one another, and it ensures that the air-moving ability of the system isn't bought at the expense of agility.

What this translates into is a system that cannot be wrong footed. Nothing I try, from the weirdest recesses of Roon – from the seventies-tinged

**An unusual driver compliment, but one that works like a charm**

Dutch/Turkish rock of Altın Gün through to Zero 7 – has it sounding anything other than exceptional. This system exhibits a quality that is truly chameleonic. Quite often in these pieces, I will say words to the effect that: “good though it is in many areas, it does its best work with x”. That doesn't apply here. It doesn't matter

### These two different design philosophies work together in a way that is wonderful

whether you're a world authority on Gregorian Chant or a veteran of Detroit Techno, this system has your back. Sit down in front of it, choose a piece of music that your neurons know as an involuntary reflex and it will deliver it in a way that delights.

Part of this is down to an uncanny similarity between these two otherwise very different companies. Neither Alluxity nor Fink Team is worried about 'character' in their products. They are designed in a

manner that scratches the particular itch that needs scratching and the result is fundamentally accurate, but also a reflection of those concepts. Together, they achieve something greater than the sum of their already considerable parts. The Alluxity duo combines its jewel-like build with an effortless transparency that the Borg is able to exploit and complement with its impressive sensitivity and sublime ability to create a stereo image. It even works aesthetically; where normally I wouldn't be first in the queue for orange electronics, here, against those imposing cabinets, it works a charm.

### The main event

The result is a very covetable system indeed. It combines sensible footprint, peerless build and comprehensive functionality with the ability to make anything you listen to feel like an event. Looking from the outside in, the desire of some audio companies to fix specific ills might seem almost quixotic at times. From where I'm sitting right now, it is something to be enthusiastically celebrated ●



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# I've started, so I'll finish

There's been a lot of talk about how digital music has brought about a change in people's listening habits. **Neville Roberts** discovers if there's any truth in the theory

**B**ack in October 2019, it was National Album Day in the UK. If you've not heard of it, that is perhaps not surprising as it's only been going for two years. The idea behind the event is to promote the complete and proper listening of albums from start to finish in the way the artist intended. There is a view that with the advent of digitally recorded music and the availability of listening via streaming services, people are now only listening to one or two of their favourite tracks from an album, before moving on to something else.

Deezer, the French streaming music service, did a study in the UK and found that 15 percent of listeners under the age of 25 have never sat through a full album. The main reason cited was a lack of time to dedicate to listening to music, although blame was also attributed to the 'Skip' button. Overall, Deezer found that album listening in the UK is down to just 17 minutes per day, lower than the global average of 26 minutes. It's not all bad news, as 82 percent of people in the survey claim to have listened to a full album and 74 percent said they are more likely to listen to an album by an artist if they've seen them live.

The theme of National Album Day in 2019 was 'Don't Skip' and aimed to encourage music lovers to discover albums, both new and classic, as a complete body of work that tells a story. The aim was also to highlight the well-being and mental health benefits of album listening as a form of musical mindfulness.

## The ability to play a single track rather than an entire album is really nothing new

master half-track 15IPS rather than domestic quarter-track 7.5IPS. Of course, this genre lends itself to listening to a complete work that generally equates to an entire recorded album. I do also enjoy some jazz, and I must confess that I often dip into just a few of my favourite tracks from a particular performer. Vinyl, of course, has the advantage of being the first 'random access' format so, as with the digital formats, whether streamed, downloaded, or on CD, picking out a single track to listen to is an easy job. Tape has to be spooled to find a specific track, although this can be made less of a problem by splicing in leader tape between tracks of a professional unidirectional recording, but of course this is not possible with bidirectionally recorded domestic versions.

Back in the fifties and sixties, people could buy their favourite track as a single 45rpm record, and these were often produced as a loss-leader by the record companies in



Some of the UK's best-selling albums – but how many are listened to all the way through?

the hope that listeners would be encouraged to go on to purchase the complete album. Alas, in my case, my pocket money would not allow me to acquire anything larger than a 7in single of my choice of music to play on my 'portable' Collaro Studio autochanger. The modern-day equivalent is to download a single track as a 'try before you buy' option. The point is that the opportunity to play a single track is really nothing new.

## In for the long haul

A study carried out by the Entertainment Retailers Association in 2018 offered further evidence of the continuing relevance of albums today. The study showed that nearly 60 percent of respondents had listened to an album in full in the month prior to the online survey. And while albums are most often associated with older music consumers, the research suggested that it is actually younger fans who are more likely to have recently listened to an album – maybe they have more pocket money than we did in my day. Seriously though, 55 percent of people surveyed who were aged 25 or below said they had listened to an album in the previous week, compared with 45 percent of listeners aged from 45-54 and just 33 percent of those aged 55 or above.

So, the alleged decline in listening to complete albums may be nothing but media hype. Digital music doesn't seem to have triggered a decline in album purchases and the opportunity to select individual tracks has always been there. Streaming service providers may wish to promote the idea that they can best offer modern listeners what they want because of their flexibility, but music enthusiasts will always prefer to acquire complete albums ●



NEVILLE ROBERTS  
Long player

# HEAVY METAL

How do high-end brands deal with making their products more affordable? **Ed Selley** thinks these two have got it sussed



## COMPONENTS

### KRELL K-300i £9,000

Krell's smallest integrated (a relative term) can be ordered as an analogue-only device or, as here, with a comprehensive add-on board that offers a selection of digital inputs, UPnP streaming and full Roon compatibility, effectively making it an all-in-one system.

### MAGICO A1 £10,000

Magico's smallest speaker is a two-way standmount that takes the company's very specific design philosophy – that includes aluminium cabinets, beryllium tweeters and graphene-infused carbon drivers – and brings it to an almost terrestrial price point.



**L**et me start by presenting two contradictory statements. The system you see here represents the entry level for the brands involved. It also costs £19,000. This might seem rather peculiar, but it is the asking price to join two very exclusive clubs and while the cost might feel high, it is what's required when the engineering is this involved.

Take the Magico A1 standmount speaker. This is the most affordable stereo model that the company makes in a range that extends to the point where "POA" begins to appear in the price list in lieu of a number. You might question why a two-way standmount can ever cost £10,000, but even though the A1 is the simplest speaker Magico makes it possesses some extraordinary engineering. The

tweeter is a 28mm beryllium dome and the mid/bass driver is made of layers of carbon fibre weave bolstered by XG Nanographene to further stiffen and dampen it.

Incredibly, this is but the tip of the iceberg. The cabinet is made entirely from aircraft-grade aluminium that would ensure that judged by any normal standard it would count as enormously stiff and rigid, but Magico

## BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM KRELL/MAGICO



proceeds to brace it anyway. As well as the drivers, it houses a crossover that uses a design process the company terms 'Elliptical Symmetry' – making use of components from German company Mundorf that cost enough to buy a seriously capable speaker in their own right. The A1 incorporates everything that the company holds to be important and might be seen as the irreducible minimum of those ideals.

### Well connected

Krell's K-300i exhibits a similar philosophy, but the execution is slightly different to the point where I'm going to say with a straight face it represents strong value for money. You can buy it as a purely analogue amp with balanced and unbalanced analogue inputs for £1,000 less, but adding the digital board gives the K-300i an impressive spread of extra functions. As well as coaxial, optical and USB inputs, you can connect it directly to a Roon Core and it handles MQA too. More unusually, there's a pair of HDMI inputs with Audio Return Channel to make collating a wide spread of sources easier than on almost any other amp I've seen.

It's still very much a Krell, though. Peer through the top cover and you'll see a toroid the size of a melon that helps it produce 150W into 8ohm, which proceeds to double into four. Thanks to other refinements, it produces this power with exceptional linearity across an extremely wide frequency response. By dint of being a relatively compact, sealed cabinet, the Magico is not an easy speaker to drive

### If this is entry level, what on earth can the more expensive products do?

so here is an amplifier that's well equipped enough to get the job done.

In the here and now though, what this system does as a combination is more remarkable than any single facet of its specification or engineering, and what it does is disappear. If that sounds weirdly anticlimactic, like a firework that explodes only with black light, the reality is that as a means of listening to your music there's little I've ever

**Above left: Beryllium tweeters are the tip of the tech iceberg**

**Above: The Krell is an extensively specified powerhouse of an amplifier**

**Above right: The only thing more impressive than the build is the sound quality**

heard that comes anywhere near it. Pinning standard descriptive phrases on it seems almost pointless because they barely scratch the surface of what it's capable of.

### Vanishing point

This vanishing act is a combination of transparent amp and source acting on drivers that are entirely free of coloration and distortion and then mounted in an enclosure that is completely inert. It sounds easy and it is the ideal of anything that genuinely aspires to be described as hi-fi, but to encounter equipment that actually does it perfectly is the audio equivalent of cold fusion. It has been a listening process that has redefined some boundaries for me.

Take the opening of *The Trinity Sessions* by Cowboy Junkies, which is Margo Timmins singing *Mining For Gold* solo and unaccompanied. It's a simple recording made on a DAT recorder with a single microphone. Played here, none of the usual technical limits apply. Timmins is unambiguously there, stood in the Holy Trinity in Toronto, which is so tangible in the performance it is



## BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM KRELL/MAGICO

effectively the only other instrument. This is not a snapshot of the event so much as a holographic reproduction, and the chances are you'll have to listen to the 92-second track a second or third time to overcome the shock of its tangibility. I certainly did.

### Upping the ante

Of course, a single female vocalist isn't the hardest of challenges. When you select something rather more complex like *Release* by Afro Celt Sound System with its dense overlaid percussion and soaring vocal turn from Sinéad O'Connor, this combination ups the ante by delivering that same unembellished view on the music. This isn't a live performance, it's a concoction of the studio where the performers were stitched together in the edit. Here, it's a presentation that's as cohesive and together as it would have been if it were a live recording.

It would be easy to chalk much of this up to the Magico and work on the principle that so long as it is fed a clean signal by a competent amplifier this is what it does, but that simply isn't true. Some brief testing with



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other equipment demonstrates that the K-300i is absolutely integral to the performance. For starters, it imbues the Magico with truly astonishing bass. I confess my understanding of the laws of physics pretty much end with agreeing to be bound by them, but I'm not sure this system signed up to the same rules. There is no bass port on the A1 and the cabinet is a

### Standard descriptive terms barely scratch the surface of what it's capable of

whisker under 40cm tall, but there are points where the low-end extension borders on subsonic.

It's no blunt instrument either, it integrates perfectly with the upper registers and even taking this system on a spirited blast through Mark Lanegan's latest album, *Somebody's Knocking*, reveals a speed and cohesion that makes it essentially unflappable. Logic dictates that this modern, slightly glassy and congested recording should be torn to shreds by

equipment this revealing, but this simply isn't the case. The pairing does suggest that there are limits to the mastering, but it still focuses more than anything else on the music itself. Would I suggest feeding this combination a diet of MP3 files? Probably not, but I do give *Raspberry Infundibulum* by the Shamen a blast and the sheer proto-dance strangeness of it is captured perfectly.

### Setting the standard

Summing up this system is not an easy task because it does things that even at the lofty asking price are beyond almost anything else I've ever listened to and it does beg the question that if this is the entry level, what on earth can the more expensive products do? We become so used to the idea that choosing a setup we like is a case of finding devices where the coloration and character that best meet our preferences and then using them to balance one another out. To find a system that dispenses with that idea entirely takes more than a little getting used to – but having experienced it, I think I'd be more than willing to give it a try ●

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# The future of music

**Chris Ward** consults both the history books and his crystal ball as he attempts to make some prophecies about the direction what we listen to is heading

**M**usic is ancient, but is it eternal? Way before prehistoric man, mankind was appreciative of sound. Academics now hypothesise that the reason we find early paintings in caves is that ancient humans were drawn to these acoustic spaces, where the quality of reverb and echoes created places suitable for the spirits of slain animals to live on. Jump forward a few millennia and Monteverdi plays with multiple voices, echoes and reverb in churches to bolster the power of religion. What goes around comes around.

It's easy to look at the progression of music in simplistic terms, developing from the primeval to the tribal, the religious to the militaristic, on to a rarified classical preserve of the wealthy, then democratised in the twentieth century through the invention of affordable playback software and hardware. But where are we going? What is the trajectory of music? Society generally suffers from a delusion that at any one time it is at the height of sophistication. So, when we look at our current access to millions of tunes via hi-res streaming platforms we feel we must have reached a zenith. Yet history teaches us that scientists pleased to discover the Earth was at the centre of the universe were in for a nasty surprise...

The writer William Gibson said: "The future is already here — it's just not very evenly distributed." So, let me try and paint you a picture of future music, based upon history

## The absence of bass and gain means music sounds bland to our primitive ears

and the clues I see all around me today.

The year is 2050; music is alive and well, but very, very different. It has become socially

stratified. The provision of free music to the masses was as smart as inviting plebs to the Coliseum to feed their primitive urges and upbeat playlists are now prescribed by GPs in lieu of social care. The wealthiest no longer listen to 'previously recorded' music, instead they tune in to their own 'live' music', generated from personal algorithms that detect the mood they are in and the mood they wish to be in. This sonic feedback loop is curated by Amazon Lifestyle from the millions of hours of machine learning created from a 2020's household listening project, codenamed Alexa.

The Bandwidth Tax of 2040 means that only the very wealthiest can afford the bass register below 70Hz. People don't really remember the loss of bass though, as the 'Antisocial Householder Act of 2030' meant that sound levels over speaking volume were enforced by 'Bose Officers' cancelling all sound inside our living pods. Headphones enable some private listening, but the Class



Action instigated after the controversy of 'Millennial Deafness Syndrome' ensured that any device was limited to the power of an intimate whisper.

Music itself is very different. The absence of prohibitively expensive bass and the lack of gain, mean it sounds rather quiet and bland to our primitive ears. Singing can still be practised but the 'Freedom of Speech' reforms of 2025 mean that anything you sing can be used against you in a court of law, so protest singers became rather meek and mild overnight. Last year's Christmas number one *La, La, La* by Elon Musk was felt to be a particularly low point.

## Silent running

Still, if you don't mind the risk of prosecution, then clandestine groups can still be found that meet to listen to 'Antiquarian Music'. Ssshhhhhh, please keep it to yourself, but on any given Saturday night, small inflatable boats set off from the high ground of Glastonbury-by-Sea to HMS Queen Elizabeth, the now derelict aircraft carrier converted by Coldplay Inc. into the largest nightclub off the United States of Eurmerica. As you walk onto Deck 54 you can hear the visceral throb of real bass and sound levels that make your ears ring the next morning. There you'll find 'real music' fans moving their bodies in a most peculiar way, dancing like nobody's watching. Of course, nobody is watching as all secret attendees agree to wear blindfolds such that they cannot prosecute each other. Free from guilt, audio acolytes writhe in hedonistic ways to the ancient beats of the golden era of sound (1945-2019). Some wallflowers hang around the edge of the dance deck until their National Anthem calls everybody to the floor, where they all worship the sacred sound of an early tribe called ABAB who sang about their 'Dancing Queen'. You heard it here first ●

**Kraftwerk eat your heart out, this is what the future of music looks like**



**CHRIS WARD**  
Blade runner

# Running in the family

Speaker manufacturers tend to leave electronics to others, but **Ed Selley** wonders if they might have some bright ideas of their own

**I**t should not come as any great surprise to find that the audio industry thrives on specialisation. Within the church of hi-fi there are, of course, manufacturers that only produce components in a single category and do very well out of it. There are also those that take pride in being able to make a complete system, keeping the entire process inhouse. Between the two exist infinite variations on the theme, but the setup here is sufficiently unusual to be worthy of comment.

Mention PMC to anybody with at least a passing understanding of the hi-fi sphere and they'll talk about speakers. The company has a superlative track record in the construction of both domestic and professional audio monitors, all tied together by the use of transmission lines to augment and shape their

bass response. In some ways, the twenty5.24i is almost the standard of what many of us expect a PMC speaker to be. It's a slim, two-way floorstander that combines a soft dome tweeter with a woven driver that exits via a transmission line that is nearly 10 feet in length.

Even though the basic formula hasn't changed, PMC has been hard at work on the details. This latest iteration features all the evolutionary developments the company has been working on. This means the transmission line exits in the specially developed 'laminair' port and that those smart outriggers you see at the bottom of the cabinet have been exactly engineered to improve the way that the speaker couples to the floor. Without looking like it has changed much of anything, PMC has in fact, changed just about everything. ▶



## COMPONENTS

### BRYSTON BDP-3 £3,900

The BDP-3 is a network streaming transport designed to work in a wide range of implementations with fit-and-forget reliability. It offers a selection of digital outputs that allow the decoding of your choice to be connected.

### BRYSTON BDA-3 £3,600

An exceptionally flexible DAC that has a complete range of connections you might reasonably expect, but then proceeds to add a whole set of HDMI options to act as a 4k video switcher while decoding the audio.

### PMC COR £6,000

The Cor is an integrated amplifier that builds on the experiences of PMC's active speakers and places a 95W Class AB amplifier that adheres to the company's design principles in a striking-looking piece of industrial design.

### PMC TWENTY5.24i £5,500

The largest two-way speaker in the newly revised twenty5i lineup combines a 170mm woven mid/bass driver with a 19mm soft dome tweeter in a cabinet that benefits from laser measurement and includes a 3m transmission line.



## BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM PMC/BRYSTON



If the twenty5.24i is PMC doing business as usual, the Cor is anything but. The company wanted to make an amplifier, so it did. It isn't the start of a planned range or a piece of brand building, in fact more than anything, the Cor is a physical manifestation of the company scratching an itch. It is an amplifier built as PMC feels that amplifiers should be. This means you get 95W into 8ohm, a useful spread of analogue inputs and tone controls that are actually designed to be used in such a way to facilitate that.

### Cor blimey

The front end comes from Bryston, a company with an entirely symbiotic relationship with PMC that shares a similar attitude toward fripperies. The BDP-3 is a network streaming front end designed to function in environments that would leave rivals flummoxed and sulking, and features a degree of customisation that simply isn't present elsewhere. Outputting to a BDA-3 DAC, the duo oozes a 'built to survive the end of the world' feel that I'm hugely fond of. There's

something charming about the way that, by eschewing any conscious aesthetic, Bryston wound up with one of the most distinctive design languages in the industry.

The trio of units feel special in an entirely pragmatic way. The 24i is a compact and elegant speaker, but there's a heft to the way it is built that

## It's no surprise to find that the relationship between PMC and Bryston is symbiotic

never lets you forget it's related to speakers designed to withstand anything the professional world can throw at them. The Cor is infused with the same feeling of purpose. That giant volume knob isn't a design flourish. It gears the pot so you can set exactly the right volume rather than an approximation of it. The Bryston might have swathes of setup menus, but once it is set the way you want it it stays set that way – seemingly

**Above left: Slender cabinets give little hint of the extension that's on offer**

**Above: The Cor and Bryston duo exude a purposeful air**

impervious to what your network might be doing in the meantime. This is heavy-duty hardware that manages not to dominate the space it is in.

### Hanging out

It will fill it, though. Keen to hold off talking about sledgehammer bass for at least part of this review, I begin with *Exile*, the recently released duet between Taylor Swift (yep, really) and Bon Iver. This stunning, goosebump-inducing work is not about low end, but it lives or dies on the perception of scale and this system delivers it perfectly. Both Swift and Justin Vernon are convincingly sized and the supporting music hangs behind them in a way that extends far beyond the position of the speakers themselves. The piano that anchors the track sounds big and convincing and when the gentle application of low end happens towards the end of the track, it's beautifully understated. The 24i can hit like a hammer when you need it to but, crucially, when you don't need that blunt force, it's exceptionally dextrous too.



## BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM PMC/BRYSTON

Above these technical aspects, there is an emotional content to the performance that belies the exceptional accuracy with which it goes about reproducing music. It may sound contradictory, but the reality is that the lack of embellishment these products apply to music means the emotional content shines through perfectly. The opening *Ponta de Lança Africano* from Jorge Ben's *África Brasil* is reproduced with its warm and analogue quality intact and it absolutely fizzles with the infectious energy that earns this album a place of the list of 'Music I am no longer allowed to drive to.'

### Control freak

There is also an agility here that is a demonstration of the combined qualities of the components that forms it. The Cor exerts a level of control over the 24i that means it powers through the insanely catchy *Tell The DJ* by Le Peuple De L'Herbe in a head-nodding, foot-tapping whirlwind of energy and punch. The deep electronic note at the start is effortlessly

subsonic; a pressure wave felt as much as heard. PMC's feelings on amplifier design naturally feed off its speakers and it should be no surprise to find the relationship between the two is symbiotic. Even allowing for this, it's hard to work out where the talents of the amplifier end and the loudspeaker's begin.

### This is heavy-duty hardware that does not dominate the space it is placed in

Against this, the charms of the Bryston are more subtle, but make themselves felt the longer you listen. I close off my session with *Impossible Object*; the haunting closer from Hayden Thorpe's *Diviner*. This is an exceptionally simple track with only Thorpe's vocals, his piano and the gentlest application of electronica. There's nowhere for any mistakes to hide and it is here that the Bryston duo shows how good it is. Thorpe's

striking vocal is flawless and aided by the tiny details of the movements of his hands on the keys, controlled breathing and tiny inflexions are all there. They aren't overblown or obvious, simply stitched into the music itself. It's unshowy and, because of that, utterly wonderful.

### Class of its own

The more you listen, the more it becomes clear this is a class act. PMC's single mindedness and vast experience with speakers makes itself felt with every driver excursion of the twenty5.24i and what is so impressive is that the Cor, despite being one of one in the PMC electronics range, feels exactly the same in the way it works with your music. Mated with a digital source as capable as the Bryston, you get all the positives of the single mindedness wrapped up in a system with an exceptionally broad range of talents. It is undoubtedly a good thing for companies to specialise, but this setup shows that the same passions applied elsewhere can make that main offering better still ●



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# Live, die, repeat

Not so long ago, multi-channel music and movie setups looked like bringing an end to traditional two-channel hi-fi. **Ed Selley** wonders if the reverse is possible

One of the most commonly recurring formulaic lines in cinema is someone yelling: “I should have killed you when I had the chance!” at a moment of high tension. Cliché or not, it holds some truth for the two-channel audio market. In the early part of this century, there was a belief in some industry circles that multi-channel audio had effectively beaten two-channel with components offering greater flexibility at more affordable prices. If listeners wanted stereo from these versatile AV hubs, they could select the appropriate setting on their multi-channel amplifier or receiver.

As the brave new world of multi-channel caught on, many companies very publicly wound down their two-channel product lines and retailers adjusted their stock and priorities accordingly. As sales increased, it looked like affordable two-channel was finally done as multi-channel moved in with AV receivers poised to strike the killing blow to their stereo brethren.

Fast forward to 2020 and many are probably regretting not taking the shot. Multi-channel has fallen back to levels where we see brands rediscovering a love of stereo.

There's not the space here for a full analysis of why this has happened, but one key reason is that modern stereo equipment has become more versatile by borrowing some familiar and useful functionality from multi-channel components, increasing its flexibility considerably.

## For some, nothing less than full surround sound immersion will do

Take the amplifier *Group Test* back in *HFC* 459. During testing, the three models with optical inputs also served to improve my TV viewing experience, with the audio signal routed through the amps to a pair of hi-fi speakers. When digital inputs on stereo equipment were rare, the advantage that AV receivers offered in terms of different types of input looked unassailable, but now that's far from the case. Some stereo components have gone even further, with one-box stereo music systems like Naim's Uniti Star (*HFC* 433) and NAD's M10 (*HFC* 451) incorporating HDMI ARC (Audio Return Channel). This doesn't offer any sonic benefit over optical for two-channel audio *per se*, but the convenience benefits are huge. Turn your TV on and components connected in this way turn on at the same time and the volume can be controlled from your TV remote, while allowing viewers to improve the sound.

In the last year, I've tested two-channel products that had extremely well thought out room EQ functionality to ensure that speakers with less than optimal placement can



be gently influenced using subtle digital signal processing into sounding their best. Some of these also offer bass management; allowing a subwoofer to be integrated into a system rather than tweaked to fit in. From a purist perspective, this can sound mildly alarming, but in the preceding two decades of competitive AV receiver design to do the most at a given price point, some genuinely beneficial technical advancements have resulted.

## Return to stereo

With many consumers deciding they no longer want more than two speakers in their living rooms, stereo equipment has taken full advantage by incorporating some of the AV niceties that many have grown used to. I've often remarked that hi-fi equipment is changing and this assimilation of some of the roles and responsibilities now being undertaken by other devices is part of that.

Despite a move to two-channel popularity, and because history has a tendency to repeat itself, discussions with industry insiders concerning the dominance of stereo suggest that it's not quite over for multi-channel. For some, nothing less than full surround sound immersion will do and, with the announcements of Dolby Atmos Music at last year's CES Las Vegas, it looks like we can look forward to music in the round making another comeback.

What is more important to stereo manufacturers is learning about what they can do to ensure their product stays relevant, not only to existing customers but to those who are returning to the fold after some years with AV products. Two-channel was fortunate to escape a killer blow last time, but if movies have taught us anything, there's usually a sequel with just as much jeopardy around the corner, and it pays to be prepared ●

**Multi-channel might be on the wane for music fans, but stereo lovers have benefitted from its development**



**BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM**  
CAMPFIRE AUDIO/SHANLING



# A kind of magic

Two wizards of portable audio combine to create a setup that **Ed Selley** feels has just as much worth for those stuck at home

I suspect that for a few people who have turned the page to be confronted by a portable audio system, the idea of featuring equipment designed for use on the move after a sustained period of being invited to sit around going nowhere might seem a little perverse. Surely, this would have been the point where a veritable monolith, a no-holds-barred tribute to the high-end might make more sense? My response is to invite you to hear me out on this one.

For many of us, the reality of our enforced period of sitting around at home hasn't completely matched expectations, particularly if your setup is in your living room and you share your

space with others. Sure, you have had more time to listen to your system, but if the other occupants want to watch *Pointless* there's not a lot you can do about it. The idea of equipment that you can use in a variety of locations suddenly looks more appealing even if we aren't leaving the house so much.

Spend a little time with the Campfire Audio Andromeda 2020 and that appeal only increases. The basic design is superficially similar to the more affordable Io we looked at in *HFC* 462, but internally the two models are very different. The Andromeda makes use of five balanced armatures per enclosure; a pair each for the bass and treble and a single one for the midrange. These are ▶

## COMPONENTS

### SHANLING M6 £500

The M6 is a fully balanced dual-DAC portable audio player that offers a selection of balanced and unbalanced headphone connections and can also be used as a USB DAC. The internal memory of 32GB can be augmented with a micro SD card of up to 2TB.

### CAMPFIRE AUDIO ANDROMEDA 2020 £1,100

The latest version of the Andromeda takes the five-driver layout of the preceding models and refines the concept, adding a solid body acoustic chamber system that better controls resonances. Each housing is made from sections of machined aluminium with a stainless steel spout for the supplied domes to affix to.



## BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM CAMPFIRE AUDIO/SHANLING



placed in the company's trademark TAEC (Tuned Acoustic Expansion Chamber) system that is key to its design philosophy.

### The Andromeda strain

The Andromeda is exceptionally easy to drive, but this should not be confused with the idea that it doesn't benefit from a decent source – and the Shanling M6 fulfils the role admirably. The flagship of its portable player lineup, it has the sort of spec that has me scratching around for a less clichéd way of saying I don't know how it's done it for the money. The player uses a pair of AKM AK4495SEQ DACs, each with its own crystal oscillator. These are controlled via custom code embedded on a FPGA. The output stage is bespoke and is able to couple the twin DAC output even when used via a single-ended connection. It's the only device I've ever seen with 2.5, 3.5 and 4.4mm outputs.

Amazingly, the software is as good as the hardware. Thanks to a clean Android installation, using the M6 is something you find innately familiar rather than a step into the unknown.

It can handle micro SD cards up to 2TB, but will also read a music library over network or you can install the streaming service app of your choice.

When the two are combined, while I have no doubt that there are more visually spectacular ways of spending £1,600, there are few that will be better built. Both companies understand that unnecessary

### A perfect embodiment of the advantages of an in-ear monitor over a full-size speaker

flourishes might look good, but anything that impedes your ability to use the product will grate after a very short time. This is why the M6 is not only exceptionally solid and immaculately finished, but sensibly palm sized and with a selection of hard button controls for major functions. It's also why the Andromeda is the same shape and size as the Io; because it is comfortable and something you can happily wear for

**Above left: The build quality of the Shanling is truly outstanding for the price**

**Above right: Newly updated for 2020, the Andromeda is a superb performer**

hours at a time. Function very definitely dictates form in this case.

More than simply working as an alternative, though, this system offers scope to deliver a performance that has you sticking with it long after you can technically return to using your main system. The Campfire Audio is a perfect embodiment of the advantages that an in-ear monitor enjoys over a full-size speaker. Forget finding a £1,100 cabinet that gets close to it, for frequency response and cohesion, you could have a budget ten times the size and not get near.

### New order

What this translates to is music that can seem congested, even chaotic, with conventional systems – like John Hopkins' *Open Eye Signal* – suddenly takes on an order that snaps everything into focus. Campfire Audio makes no bold claims as to the frequency response of the Andromeda, but fitted snugly into your ear canal it delivers across the threshold of your hearing with a perfect, ruler-flat response. The effect is astonishingly vivid and within a short space of time,

## BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM CAMPFIRE AUDIO/SHANLING



it's as if there's no perceivable transmission system for the music arriving in your head exactly as the artist intended.

### Quality control

As the source for the Andromeda, the M6's role in achieving this is less overt, but the more time you spend with the Shanling the more it impresses. There is a balance to the way it combines enough tonal sweetness to take the edge off a poorer recording without compromising the perceived accuracy of great ones. No less useful is that the power of the Shanling's output stage combined with the sensitivity of the Campfire Audio results in an effortlessness that usually requires an amplifier the size of fridge or speaker the size of a bungalow – or indeed the combination of both – to achieve.

This astonishing process of decongestion means that music you think you know can take on entirely new qualities. *Excess*, the opening track of Tricky's *Blowback* is a giant, brooding monster played on just about anything, but here it's akin to



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riding a giant tidal wave of sound which never overwhelms you. Instead you remain on the crest, propelled by the sheer power of the delivery. Change tack completely and switch to the joyously simple *Big Cars* by Heather Myles; an entirely straightforward Country & Western ode to oversized Detroit steel, and the

### There might be more spectacular ways to spend £1,600, but few will be better built

fury and bombast melts away. What remains is the complete lack of constraint to the delivery. For sheer, unencumbered musicality, very little even gets close.

And, of course, once it's possible to routinely venture out to other places, don't forget that this duo has all the qualities needed to be every bit as exceptional on the move too. Thanks to the level of seal the Campfire is able to provide and the Shanling's power in reserve, there are few locations

that this system cannot deliver the same astonishingly vivid performance that it can at home. It's small enough to keep about your person and the decision to equip the M6 with a USB-C connection means it's highly likely it will charge and connect via cables you have to hand anyway.

### Extra terrestrial

What makes this system very special is that it can do things that are usually the preserve of the high end at a price that borders on terrestrial. In terms of the space, scale and definition it offers, returning to conventional loudspeakers can feel like a bit of a let down. This is not simply an aid to commuting or even a source of solace when you're denied access to your main system – although it excels at both. What it also offers is a glimpse of a level of performance that transcends pretty much anything at a remotely similar price and does so while asking very little of itself. This is the rare moment where convenience dovetails perfectly with performance and the results are quite simply magnificent ●

# Climate change

**Nigel Williamson** explores the different ways that musicians can help ensure the world reverts to a healthier future once the world returns to normal

**T**here has been one beneficiary in the devastating health crisis laying waste to our lives – and that's the environment. As COVID-19 has decimated livelihoods and the normal functioning of society, CO2 emissions have plummeted during the economic meltdown.

The absence of summer music festivals and the cancellation of world tours by big-named acts has made its contribution to this planetary breathing space, so it's ironic to recall that before lockdown, the music industry was engaged in a serious debate about how touring musicians can reduce their carbon footprint and how festivals and concerts can limit the waste they generate, 80 percent of which is non-recyclable.

In February, Dan Snaith – who records as Caribou – told *The New Yorker* magazine that musicians and fans would have to reduce the amount of travelling they do in response to the climate emergency.

"We have to stop seeing it as reasonable that we'd play in Barcelona one day, London the next and New York two days later," he said. "And stop seeing it as reasonable that, at a big festival in Barcelona, 50,000 people there have flown to attend."

Coldplay announced they would not be touring their *Everyday Life* album due to environmental issues and

## Unsound calculates its carbon emissions and plants trees to balance its impact

Massive Attack revealed they were considering ending touring altogether for similar reasons. While their concerns are

legitimate, both bands are rich enough to be able not to tour. Those musicians in a less financially privileged position who have found their income has dried up under lockdown may see things differently.

When the world returns to normal, musicians resume touring and we can all enjoy the communal experience of live music again, we will have to consider how to limit the environmental damage.

The non-profit organisation Reverb works with artists to reduce concert and tour footprints via steps such as eliminating single-use bottles, using sustainable biodiesel fuel in tour buses, donating food waste and encouraging fans to carpool and take public transport.

Reverb has to date worked on such packages for more than 250 tours, with clients including Fleetwood Mac, The 1975, Florence And The Machine and Mumford & Sons.

Other artists have launched their own personal sustainability initiatives. Working on the basis that every



little counts, the likes of Willie Nelson and Neil Young have long been ahead of the curve and have for several years been using tour buses that run on biodiesel fuel.

And the emission levels can be alarming, even on the most modest of tours. When Animal Collective last year used a carbon calculator to estimate how they were damaging the planet, they discovered that during a 10-day tour they emitted the same amount as eight cars over an entire year. They have now invested in The Ocean Foundation's offset programme, Seagrass Grow, which plants and protects coastal wetlands.

There are other off-set models, too, and at least one international festival – Unsound, held annually in Kraków, Poland – calculates its total carbon emissions and plants enough trees to help balance its impact.

## Doing your bit

Several years ago Arcade Fire launched PLUS1, a scheme in which one dollar, pound or Euro is added to every concert or festival ticket sold and the money is then used to fund good causes. Over time, other bands have signed up and climate emergency has risen to the top of the list of PLUS1 supported causes.

There has been much talk that the world can never be the same again once the 2020 pandemic has receded and it has been estimated that global carbon emissions could fall by 2.5-billion tonnes this year. However, Doctor Fatih Birol, head of the International Energy Agency, warns against viewing this steep decline as a climate triumph.

The danger is that once the COVID-19 emergency passes, carbon emissions will soar again. Even as we celebrate the return of live entertainment, the music industry will have to resume the debate that was so rudely interrupted about how to play its part in combatting climate emergency ●

**Massive Attack are considering stopping touring to limit their impact on the environment**



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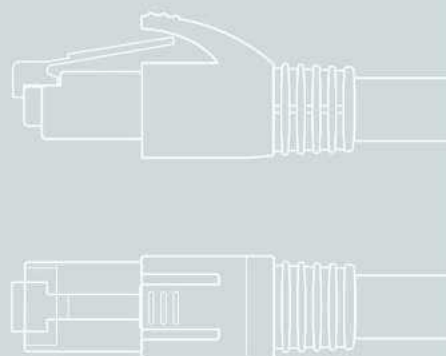
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